

For the Greater Good

by Wendymr

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Summary: Another asteroid is about to destroy the Earth... will it destroy Superman instead?

For the Greater Good

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I have to give a WHAM warning at this point. This story contains a major WHAM which is indicated right from the start (in the first few pages), and those who have read it so far suggest I recommend having a box of tissues handy when reading. The only further comment I will make is that, like one of our fandom's very top authors, I do believe in putting my toys back in the same condition in which I found them, once I'm finished with them.

Finally, the characters in this story (with the exception of Lois and Clark's children) are the property of DC Comics and/or Warner Bros, and no infringement of their or anyone else's rights is intended by

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Feedback, as ever, very welcome at [w.m.richards@hrm.keele.ac.uk](mailto:w.m.richards@hrm.keele.ac.uk), or [wendy@kingsmeadowcr.freeseve.co.uk](mailto:wendy@kingsmeadowcr.freeseve.co.uk)

Wendy Richards

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- For the Greater Good -

Where *\*was\** Clark? He had flown off several hours ago in response to the summons on his UN buckle, a device the United Nations had given to Superman some time ago so that they could contact him when he was needed. There had been nothing on the TV news to indicate Superman's presence in any trouble-spot, so what was he doing?

Musing yet again that this was all part of being married to a Super-hero, Lois turned her attention to preparing the children's supper. It had been Clark's turn tonight, but when Superman was needed all such divisions of labour went by the board. Sometimes Lois felt that she understood just what a single parent went through, except that in her case she *\*had\** a partner who was supposed to be sharing the workload with her. If she was managing on her own, she would make arrangements to cope; as it was, she frequently found herself having to rearrange other commitments at very short notice when Clark was called away unexpectedly. Very occasionally, it occurred to her that being a single parent would actually make life easier, since she would *\*know\** that she had to do everything herself, instead of never being sure whether Clark would be able to fulfil his commitments on any particular day.

Not that she really minded; well, okay, it was a source of irritation, and she occasionally even allowed herself a few grumbles on the subject to Clark, or more frequently to Martha and Jonathan. She knew all too well that Clark felt guilty enough about having to leave her to cope alone, and had no wish to add to that guilt, apart from the obvious fact that she understood how important his Superman activities were, and fully supported him in them. Martha and Jonathan provided an essential safety-valve on occasion; Lois sometimes wondered just what she would do without them. They were close to being seventy now, and Jonathan was certainly not in the best of health.

Later, when she'd put the children to bed with a promise that Daddy would look in to say goodnight as soon as he got home, Lois slowly returned downstairs. There was still no sign of Clark and she was getting worried. He usually tried to let her know what he was doing if he was going to be gone for some considerable time, either directly by telling her where he was going, or indirectly by making sure that his activities were covered on a news broadcast; the reporter in Lois always ensured that she watched the news. But there had still been nothing the last time she'd checked.

As she poured herself yet another coffee a few minutes later, she heard a familiar sound out in the back garden; a moment later the kitchen door was thrown open and Superman strode in. He spun back into his normal clothes before approaching her; she was about to hurry to him for a kiss, but Clark fended her off.

"Sorry, honey, but do you mind if I say goodnight to the kids first? I really tried to get back before their bedtime, but it was just impossible to get away."

Surprised, Lois waved her hand in the direction of the door in a 'be my guest' gesture. There was something wrong. He hadn't said anything, but after six years of marriage she knew her husband well enough to know when he was worried. And he was worried about something now; he had avoided her gaze as he'd walked past her, and he had turned down an opportunity for a kiss. Neither of those were normal Clark reactions, unless he was hiding something from her.

Wherever he'd been, there was clearly something seriously wrong.

As the low murmur of her husband's voice drifted down to her from upstairs, punctuated by giggles and shrieks from their son and daughter, Lois focused on meeting her husband's immediate physical needs. He would be tired; he was probably also hungry since he'd missed dinner. Well, there was still some casserole left; transferring some to a plate, she heated it in the microwave while musing wryly that Clark would normally tell her not to waste the effort. He would just apply his heat vision, under normal circumstances. But somehow Lois sensed that tonight he probably wouldn't care whether he ate or not, so leaving anything up to him was not a good idea. He wouldn't do it, whereas if she handed him a plate of hot food and a glass of milk on his return downstairs he would eat it because she had gone to the trouble of getting it for him.

Several minutes later she heard his tread on the stairs, so she quickly carried through his meal. As she'd expected, he initially protested that he wasn't hungry, but then capitulated; knowing Clark as she did, Lois suspected that it had dawned on him that if he ate, it would give him a chance to delay talking to her about what was going on.

Finally he pushed his plate away and turned his gaze to her. Lois couldn't manage to stifle her gasp at what she saw in his expression; his face was drawn and his eyes looked haunted. For all that he was Superman, her husband looked as if he had aged ten years or more in the few hours he'd been away from her.

"Clark - what is it?" she asked him anxiously.

He stood and reached for her hand, a brief smile flitting momentarily across his face. "Let's go and sit down over there," he suggested, indicating the couch. "This'll take a while - we might as well be comfortable."

To her surprise, once they were seated Clark pulled her into his arms, drawing her close to him for a long kiss. It wasn't passionate, but it was deeply needy. In other circumstances, Lois might have thought that he'd been at an emergency where he just hadn't been able to save someone, but not having seen anything on the news she doubted that was the cause of his mood tonight. And anyway, while Clark did obsess when he couldn't do as much as he often felt he should be able to, that rarely left him as deeply depressed as he seemed to be right now. He seemed, at this moment, to be drawing strength from her embrace: because his emotions had been drained by whatever he'd been

doing, or because he felt he needed it in order to tell her about what was bothering him? Lois wasn't sure. But she kissed him back, wrapping her arms around him tightly and doing her best to transmit love and reassurance to him.

Clark raised his head at last and simply gazed at her face; she smiled lovingly up at him, raising her hand to stroke his cheek. "Whatever it is, honey, we can get through it together. You know what you told me all that time ago - 'being together is stronger than me alone'?"

"Yeah," he acknowledged softly. "It's just... Lois, I think this is going to be the hardest thing we've ever faced. And ultimately, we're not going to be able to face it together."

What did he mean? Puzzled, Lois searched his face for clues to the meaning of his enigmatic remark, but all she could see was further evidence of the strain he was suffering.

Quietly, he asked, "Lois, do you remember the Nightfall Asteroid?"

"Of course I do!" she exclaimed, but then her expression grew tense as her brain began putting two and two together and she began to work out just what it was Clark was going to tell her. Playing for time, she recalled the incident he'd referred to, her voice now tentative, a frightened note beginning to creep in. "You flew into space to stop it, and it nearly killed you - you lost your memory for several days and we all thought the world was going to end."

"Well, I probably didn't handle that as well as I could have," he commented with a shrug. "I was a bit too cocky for my own good, and I didn't think hard enough about the best way of tackling it. I'd do it differently now." He inhaled deeply. "This... well, it's similar, but a heck of a lot worse."

Lois drew back from him and studied him closely. "The UN want you to fly into space and stop another asteroid?" she demanded, horrified.

"Not an asteroid this time," Clark replied quietly. "This is part of an exploded planet, and it's heading for Earth."

"What, a meteorite?"

"Yeah, I guess so - a pretty large one, though."

"How big?" Lois asked anxiously.

"At least twice the size of Nightfall," Clark explained. "It's further away at the moment, but its size meant it was more easily seen. If it continues on its present course, it will impact with Earth in about four months' time. And the effect will be catastrophic - the scientists at EPRAD don't think it would be possible for any human life to survive on the planet."

Lois caught her breath sharply as Clark concluded his almost monotonic recitation of the facts. But then she caught his arm and gave him a determined stare. "But they can deal with it themselves - even with Nightfall there was the 'nuclear option,' wasn't there?"

Clark sighed. "The problem with that is the meteor could shatter, all right, but there's a problem. Because of its composition, once it interacts with a nuclear explosion the pieces would be radioactive, and the scientists think the result would be a nuclear winter once the pieces impact, and the fallout would destroy all organic matter on Earth."

"So... the Earth could be doomed anyway?" Lois gasped. "I take it no-one else knows about this yet?"

"Nope," Clark agreed. "And I'm sworn to secrecy - or at least, Superman is. But there's no way I wasn't going to tell you about this. The only thing is that the Planet can't print it yet."

Lois shrugged. "There'd be mass panic if we did run it. But there must be a way out of the situation - there has to be!"

"Yeah, there is," Clark replied, sounding resigned. "Me."

"But what can you do?" Lois demanded sceptically. "Not to run down Superman or anything, but if a nuclear warhead would just split this thing into pieces which could still cause massive damage, what can you do?"

Clark shrugged again. "The EPRAD scientists and their counterparts at the UN think I could break up the meteor and direct the pieces somewhere else - or at least steer them a tiny bit off course so they won't land on Earth. Or they can give me some powerful non-nuclear explosives, and I could punch a hole in the thing and let the explosion shatter it, and I could deal with the fragments. Or possibly both, depending on what seems the best option at the time."

"But, Clark, you can only hold your breath for twenty minutes!" Lois protested. "And you say this thing is further away now than Nightfall is - how on earth do they think you're going to be able to do all that? Or... do they mean you to go when this thing's nearer?"

"No - the nearer it is, the more likely it is that pieces will head in this direction once it's shattered," Clark explained. "They want me to go in the next couple of weeks. The longer I leave it, the more likely it is that even if I succeed in breaking up the meteor there'll still be massive destruction on Earth." He paused, gazing down at his hands for a long moment, then focused his gaze on Lois again. "They'll give me an oxygen tank."

"Clark, that didn't do you much good last time!" Lois exclaimed. "You lost it somewhere in space!" She jumped to her feet and began to pace the living room. "These people seriously want you to fly into space on what could be a hopeless task - I mean, there's no guarantee that you'll even succeed - and risk your life in the process? I don't believe it! How could they...! How *\*dare\** they demand you risk your life like that!"

"Lois, if I don't risk my life on this, the entire planet could die," Clark pointed out quietly. "That's how serious this thing is."

Too many thoughts were flying through Lois's brain to allow her to

think coherently; the only concept which her mental processes could deal with was the possibility that her husband could get killed on this fool's errand, and that regardless of that possibility, some government scientists somewhere were just demanding that he do their bidding nonetheless. Blinking back tears, she faced Clark again. "You said this was part of an exploded planet - which planet?"

It was a non sequitur, a question to distract Clark and to allow her a few moments' breathing space. But his answer, when it came, drained her face of all colour and caused her to sink onto the nearest chair.

"It's Krypton, Lois."

"Krypton?" Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper. "Then... this thing contains Kryptonite...?"

"More than likely," Clark confirmed, his own voice taut with the strain he was feeling.

"Then... this is a suicide mission!" Lois shot at him. "There's no way you could survive that, even if you had enough strength to shatter the meteor. The Kryptonite would kill you - or at least take away your powers, and then you'd be stuck in space with no oxygen and no way to get back... or the explosion would kill you anyway, if you did take explosives...." She trailed off as her voice simply failed her. This wasn't just a risky mission; it really would kill Superman. His death would be an inevitable consequence of the venture. If he went.... No, it was unthinkable. He couldn't go. There was no way she would let him go. EPRAD and the UN would simply have to find another way to deal with the situation.

"Yeah, it will kill me," Clark replied softly, so quietly that Lois barely heard his words. "I'm sorry, honey - that's why I was so quiet when I got home. I was still trying to take all this stuff in."

"Do they know what they're asking of you?" Lois choked out incredulously, her voice cracking as she tried to fight back tears.

Clark shrugged again. "I think so - at any rate, they'd already worked out that the meteor is a piece of Krypton, and it seemed as likely to the EPRAD people as it did to me that it would have the same geological structure as the Kryptonite which landed on Earth with my spaceship. That's why the nuclear option won't work, by the way - they tested the effect of combining nuclear energy with Kryptonite, and the effect is that the Kryptonite amplifies the radioactivity. By the time those pieces fall to Earth, even with the effect of the Earth's atmosphere burning off some of the radioactivity, the mixture would still be deadly. And I believe them - they showed me the test results." He sighed deeply. "Yeah, they know what they're asking me, but they also know that the alternatives are far worse. They've even been talking to Bernard Klein to find out the precise effect of Kryptonite on my system - to find out whether I'd be able to destroy the meteor before I get completely overpowered by the effect of the Kryptonite."

"So they \*know\* they're asking you to commit suicide?" Lois gasped. "And they still asked you to do it?" She broke off abruptly as her voice refused to continue; the lump in her throat was almost

threatening to choke her.

Clark shook his head slowly. "I guess they don't see that there's much choice. According to the guys I spoke to, EPRAD has been working on this thing for a couple of months now, since they first saw it. They've done all the calculations, and they finally decided that Superman is the only solution. So, yeah, they need Superman to make 'the ultimate sacrifice,' they put it - to give his life for the lives of the whole world."

"No, Clark!" Lois cried, finding her voice again. "I won't let you do it!" She ran to his side, throwing herself into his arms. He pulled her into a tight embrace, burying his face in her hair and murmuring incoherent endearments to her.

After a few minutes, when she was a little calmer, Clark raised his head and tilted her chin so that she was looking at him. "Sweetheart, I won't make any decision on this alone. We decide together. The problem is...." He trailed off, grimacing, before continuing. "Lois, either I do this and lose my life, or most, if not all, the people on this planet lose their lives in a few months' time. This really could be the Apocalypse, Lois. The world really could come to an end - we thought it was going to happen with Nightfall, but this time there's no way I could stop it at the last minute like I did then. This thing's just too big."

"So you're saying that either you die now, or we all die in four months' time?" Lois choked out. "Clark... if I'm going to lose you, I don't want to - "

"Lois, no!" He stopped her before she could finish. "Think of David and Beth - you can't want...." He trailed off, unwilling to finish that thought. Their children, Lois reflected; five-year-old Beth and three-year-old David....

"No," she whispered. "But, Clark...."

"I know," he murmured, holding her tightly.

"Clark, the world can't be going to end! And you can't die!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Remember HG Wells - he told us about Utopia, he brought Tempus from the twenty-fourth century... he said \*we\* were responsible for Utopia!"

Clark gave her a wry smile. "Yeah, I thought about that one. But, Lois, it was our descendants who founded Utopia, Wells said. And... the descendants bit has already been taken care of."

David and Beth....

< I don't need to be here for Utopia to happen> That was the subtext of Clark's words, Lois realised. As that dreadful thought sank in, she realised that Clark was speaking again.

"You know, I always wondered why I was sent here, Lois. Why, out of all the people on my home planet, was I saved? Okay, I know we found out later that other Kryptonians escaped as well, but why was I different? It's always seemed to me like there was a purpose to my being sent to Earth, but I never knew what it was. Being Superman was sort of a way to... well, to find a purpose for being here." He

stopped, releasing Lois to take her hands firmly in his. "I... well, it occurred to me that maybe this is the reason. That my task is to prevent this apocalypse. And if it means that I die doing it - well, that could be all part of what was meant to happen."

< No...!> Lois's brain, her entire reactions, were screaming in protest at the idea. How could Clark reconcile himself to doing this? How could he even contemplate leaving her, abandoning his children, and flying off to his death?

Okay, he had left before in circumstances where they thought he might not return, but it had been different then. They hadn't been married. They hadn't had children. Somehow, Lois had imagined that if Ching and Zara had come for Clark after they'd been married - especially after he'd become a father - he would never for one minute have contemplated going with them.

And yet now, he really seemed to be considering doing this awful thing which, even if he was successful, would leave her a widow and her children fatherless.

And to think, she remembered inconsequentially, she had been - however briefly - comparing herself with a single parent when Clark had failed to return in time to get the children's evening meal.

With an incoherent cry, she wrapped her arms around Clark and held him as if she would never let him go.

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Much later, Clark lay awake, staring unseeingly up at the ceiling in their bedroom as Lois slept in his arms. Once she had cried herself out downstairs, he had carried her up to their bedroom and left her to prepare for bed while he locked up the house and switched off lights. She had simply clung to him once he'd come to bed, her lovemaking carrying a desperate air as if she was telling him that she never wanted to lose him

He didn't want to leave her! Or their children, come to that. But the situation seemed to leave him little choice. As he'd told Lois, it was a straightforward dilemma. He could undertake this mission, and he would die in the performance of it - that was beyond doubt. Or he could refuse, and stay with his family - only to watch them all, and the rest of the world, die when the meteor or its fragments hit Earth in a few months' time. It was possible that he himself might survive the impact... but how could he live with that, knowing that everyone he loved was dead and that he could have saved them? He would be reduced to hunting out the Kryptonite, to end his own miserable existence.

He'd told Lois they would discuss the situation and decide together, just as they had done when Zara and Ching had asked him to go with them to New Krypton. He couldn't have made that decision without her agreement; it had been her life which was being torn apart as well. And he had felt that his loyalty to Lois was more important than his loyalty to a planet and a people he had never known.

This was different. No matter how much he loved Lois, no matter how much her opinion mattered to him, there was no way he could refuse to



do this. But... he gazed down at his wife as she slept, her body curled trustingly into his, her arms still wrapped tightly around him in sleep. He knew that Lois would not refuse to let him go, no matter what she had said earlier. He knew Lois as well as he knew himself; she would already have recognised, inside, that he had to do it.

Now she only had to get used to the idea; accustom herself to the fact that very soon she would be a widow.

Clark winced at the thought; it was ironic, he reflected, given that very shortly after they'd got married they had found out that his molecular structure meant that he was likely to outlive Lois by a considerable length of time. Now, she was the one who would be alone after his death. Their children would be without a father.

When should he go? Questions which had been at the back of his mind since learning of the situation suddenly flooded into his mind. When... how... who should be told the truth... what could he do first to make things easier for Lois... how could Clark's absence and fate be explained... how could he tell his parents? The children?

First things first, he determined. When. When would be the best time?

His first instinct was to put it off, to wait until almost the last minute of the time-window EPRAD had given him. But he quickly dismissed that. Sure, he wanted as much time with Lois and their children as he could get; but was that fair to her? Once she knew he was going to die, was it fair to put her through the pain of being with him and knowing that their time was limited? Would it not be better to make it sooner rather than later?

And yet there were things he needed to sort out first. Money... the house, the children - all their budgeting was predicated on the fact that they had two incomes. And he didn't have his own life insurance... well, why would Superman need life insurance? he had thought when the suggestion had arisen. But he was in the Planet's pension and life insurance plan, so if some way could be found to prove that Clark was dead, then Lois could collect the survivor's benefit. That should see her financially secure, at least while the children were growing up.

Which, of course, raised the question of what to do about 'Clark.' When he'd gone with Ching and Zara, to New Krypton as he'd thought at the time, they hadn't really discussed a cover-story for Clark. It had been partly due to their joint refusal to admit to the possibility that he might not return; although they'd both expected that he might be gone several weeks, to have discussed the need to explain Clark's absence would have forced both of them to acknowledge the likelihood of other outcomes.

This time, they both knew he wouldn't be coming back. So perhaps the last thing he should do for Lois before leaving was to stage some sort of accident in which Clark would supposedly die and no body be recoverable, and as Superman be a witness to the accident and the 'fact' of Clark's death? He would try to think of something, Clark resolved; Lois probably wouldn't feel able to discuss it just yet, so if he could present it to her as a ready-made suggestion, it might be easier for her....

He smiled humourlessly. \*Nothing\* could make this situation any easier for Lois, he knew that. He would only be fooling himself if he imagined that he could do anything to help her through it. And he hadn't even begun to think about Beth and David, how they would react to losing their father. David was probably young enough to recover pretty quickly, but Beth....

This, of course, was something the EPRAD and UN guys had never even considered, Clark thought savagely. Everyone thought that Superman was just this guy in the Suit who flew around rescuing people. No-one even considered that he had a private life, a wife, a family; people who loved him, needed him, and who would \*care\* that he had to go off and kill himself on a mission to save the Earth. A mission, he reminded himself, which only had about a fifty-fifty chance of success in any case. \*That\* was one piece of information he hadn't yet revealed to Lois; he wasn't sure whether he should tell her that or not. She might use it as an argument against his going, but he couldn't see it that way. To him, it was a fifty per cent chance that it might \*work,\* that he might be able to save the planet, the people, his friends, those he cared about, his parents, his children, Lois....

And while that chance existed, how could he not take it, regardless of the consequences for himself?

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Clark was gone when Lois woke the following morning; she blinked and automatically reached over to his side of the bed, but there was empty space where his body should have been. Not that his absence was at all unusual, but coming the morning after the shock of discovering what the UN wanted Superman to do, it gave Lois quite a jolt. Was this what her future would be like? Year upon year of waking up alone, facing life without her beloved husband?

< He's not going> was her instant thought. < I won't let him... they can't do this to us!>

But what choice did he really have? her conscience instantly reminded her. His life versus the lives of millions of people, including his own family? Her Clark simply wouldn't see that as something which even needed to be considered. If he was still single, she was sure that he would already be preparing to make the journey into space. But he had her; he had their children to think about. That meant that he would discuss it with her, and he would give her whatever time she needed to get used to the idea; but ultimately he would still go. And she knew that no matter how much the idea appalled her, she couldn't stop him. Even if he allowed her to make the final decision on his behalf, she could not selfishly prevent him from doing what he knew to be the right thing. How could she? Even if she didn't care about herself, their friends, the entire population of the planet, there were Beth and David....

None of that, though, meant that she had to be happy about it, she thought savagely. She would dearly love to give those heartless \*monsters\* at EPRAD and the UN a piece of her mind for just assuming that it was perfectly all right to make those kind of demands of Superman without a thought as to his own needs or wishes, or the needs of people who cared about him. What did they think Superman

was? Some sort of unfeeling robot? Someone without any life of his own, who was just there to do their bidding?

A further thought struck her: her musings from before he'd arrived home the previous evening floated back into her mind and hit her with the force of a slap in the face. She had been feeling irritated by Clark's absence, and had actually allowed herself to consider that being a single parent could make her life easier. \*How\* could she have thought that for one second? How could she have ever imagined that she would be better off without him?

An old maxim, learnt in childhood, came back to her.... Be careful what you wish for; you may just get it.

< But I \*didn't\* want this!> she protested silently, the tears beginning to swell in her eyes. Never... oh, she had never even wanted to contemplate a life without Clark. A wave of guilt hit her, and she tried to push aside the memory of that stray thought. It had been foolish, and she had not meant it. Did not mean it. < Oh, Clark....>

She dashed a stray tear from her cheek furiously and concentrated on getting up, and getting the children ready for the day. A news report on TV told her, while she was supervising Beth and David's breakfast, that her husband was upstate dealing with an out-of-control forest fire; that meant she would be unlikely to see him before mid-morning at the earliest, she thought. It crossed her mind that she was almost glad that was the case; she just didn't feel ready to discuss any of this with him at the moment. She needed time to think.

The routine of dressing Beth and David, gathering together their belongings and the various items they needed for the day and then taking Beth to school and David to his nursery helped Lois to push her frozen emotions to the back of her mind. Outwardly, she presented the image of a capable, efficient professional; inwardly, she was a mess. But she couldn't allow herself to focus on that for now. For the sake of her family, she had to pretend that this was a normal working day.

Clark still hadn't returned from his firefighting efforts by the time she arrived at the Planet, which Lois again found almost a relief. They \*did\* need to talk about this, but the newsroom wasn't the place, and anyway she needed more time to come to terms with the awful magnitude of what he was proposing to do.

She almost called Jonathan and Martha, except that she knew it wouldn't be fair to tell them what was going on before Clark had a chance to talk to them. They were his parents, after all, and with something this serious it was his right to talk to them first - unless he decided that they should do it together. But she did feel a desperate need for someone with whom she could discuss this, someone who would understand her feelings, and who might....

Might what? Might help her to come up with a way around it? \*Was\* there a way around it, some way in which the meteor could be stopped without Clark having to die in the process? Her hand, which had been busily clicking on the mouse as she scanned her email, stilled and she gazed unseeingly at her monitor. There had to be some other way. Clark had been too shocked to think of one yesterday - after all, he'd been hit with this out of the blue. But if they took their time,

thought it through logically, they would find another solution, one which didn't require Superman to sacrifice himself for the sake of the planet.

And that was how she could help Clark, Lois realised quickly. He would be too concerned with making sure that she and the children would be okay, working out what he needed to do before... she hesitated, swallowing as the reality of what Clark proposed to do hit her again. Before he began his final flight, his desperate mission into space.

But \*she\* could try to find a solution... first, she needed to talk to Dr Klein.

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Clark landed silently in the back yard of his parents' farmhouse, quickly spinning into his work suit and marching towards the kitchen door. Martha Kent was inside, baking some bread, and she turned to face her son in surprise.

"Clark - it's lovely to see you, but shouldn't you be at work?"

He crossed to hug her quickly. "Yes - I'm going there in a few minutes, but I needed to talk to you and Dad first." Although he was trying to behave normally, his expression revealed some of the mental anguish he was feeling, and Martha knew her son too well not to detect it.

"Well, your father should be in the barn - he said he needed to repair a tractor part," she offered, deliberately giving no sign that she'd guessed at Clark's emotional state. He nodded and said he'd fetch his father.

A couple of minutes later the two male Kents entered the kitchen; by that time Martha had set out coffee and Clark's favourite pecan pie on the table. She noticed, however, that her son ignored the pie and barely touched his coffee.

"Mom, Dad, I have to tell you something. Yesterday, the UN sent for me and told me about a meteor which is on a direct collision course with Earth...."

The two elder Kents listened to Clark's recitation in stunned silence, Martha reaching for the hands of both her husband and son when Clark reached the point in his explanation where EPRAD had said they needed him to stop the meteor. When he told them that the meteor was in fact from Krypton, Jonathan could barely choke back an exclamation of horror. Martha could only stare at Clark in utter shock.

She managed to find her voice at last, and asked, "What are you going to do?"

"What \*can\* I do, Mom?" the frightened but determined voice of her son came back at her. "I can't refuse - if I don't do this, the planet gets destroyed, millions of people get killed. \*Lois\* gets killed - and Beth and David. How can I not go?"

"Oh, Clark...." Jonathan muttered, and grabbed for his son's hand.

"Are you sure there's no other way?"

"They say they've spent weeks going over options," Clark replied dully. "They've been through all the nuclear options, sending up an unmanned spaceship... none of that would guarantee hitting the meteor at the right point which would ensure that the fragments were small enough not to be dangerous to the Earth. Or that would ensure that larger pieces wouldn't still be on a dangerous collision course. Or that would stop the Kryptonite from interacting with the atomic energy in the nuclear warhead to create a lethally radioactive meteorite shower from hitting Earth. The only way of ensuring that it's done properly is to send me."

"But... couldn't you just get close to it, and then fire something at it?" Martha demanded. "If they're going to send you with explosives anyway...."

"It seems not - I asked them about that yesterday," Clark explained. "There isn't a weapon powerful enough, unless I was to carry up something like a nuclear warhead, and the effect of that would be uncontrollable, to say nothing about the radioactivity. They say they need me to place their explosives in just the right place, and - assuming I still have the strength and can stay afloat - try to deflect any pieces which might head towards Earth."

"Clark... can you do it?" Jonathan asked shakily.

His son turned to gaze thoughtfully at his father, his brow quickly furrowing as he saw the expression of pain on the face of the only father he'd ever known. "Dad - with the experience of Nightfall behind me, yeah, I think I should be able to do it. Of course, Nightfall wasn't made of Kryptonite, but I think I should be able to do what I need quickly, before it affects me too badly."

Martha grabbed both of Clark's hands tightly. "Oh, sweetheart, that's not what your father meant! We both believe you're capable of doing what's necessary. But... can you really do this, leaving Lois and the kids behind, knowing you won't come back?" As she spoke, she could see the anguish in Clark's eyes, and she desperately tried to maintain her own equilibrium. There would be time to cry over this later; time to weep in Jonathan's arms as they dealt with their own pain, grief for the loss of their son and the effect it would have on Clark's young family.

Clark visibly swallowed. "Mom... that's the hardest part. For me... well, how can I value my own life above the lives of millions of people? That's no sacrifice, not the way I see it. I have to do this. But Lois... and the kids... I don't want to leave them! I don't want Beth and David to grow up without a father; if they inherit my powers, I wanted to be there to show them how to use them! I wanted to see them grow, become adults, see them graduate from college... to be at Lois's side when they get married." He took a shuddering sigh. "But I won't be there for any of that. And I know Lois is devastated...."

He stopped again, blinked, then continued. "I told her last night, like I said - she took it badly, but then I didn't expect anything different. She didn't want me to do it, but I know Lois - once she thinks about it, she'll see there's no other way. But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy for her."

"Honey, don't worry about Lois - you know we'll take care of her and the kids," Martha quickly assured him. "We'll come to Metropolis as soon as you want us to, and if you'd like us to take David and Beth for a few days so you and Lois can have some time on your own we'll be happy to do that. And afterwards...." it was her turn to choke on her words; she swallowed before continuing, "After - we'll always be there for her, for as long as we can."

"I know you will, Mom," Clark whispered. "You guys are just terrific - I know I'll be leaving my family in good hands."

He got to his feet abruptly. "I need to get back to Metropolis. We'll talk to you soon, okay? And if you could come, maybe in a few days...?"

Jonathan crossed to stand in front of his son. "As soon as you want us, son." With an inarticulate sound, he wrapped his arms around Clark, pulling the younger and much stronger man into a fierce embrace. Clark responded, holding his father tightly though with his usual care not to over-use his strength.

When Clark pulled away, both men had tears streaming down their cheeks. Martha stepped forward and, a lump in her throat, said, "Clark, I want you to know that we are so proud of you, and we'll always be proud that you were our son."

"Mom...." He trailed off, unable to continue for a moment. "I've always been grateful that it was you guys who found me. You've been the best parents I could ever have hoped for... and I know my kids couldn't have better grandparents." He wrapped his arms around Martha, and she held her son tightly feeling, for a few moments, as if the strongest man in the world was relying on \*her\* for the strength to continue.

"Go on, Clark," she told him firmly at last. "You have a lot to do, and you need to be with Lois."

He nodded, stepping back, and less than a minute later they heard the familiar sound of Superman taking off from outside the house. Once he'd gone, Martha allowed herself to crumple into her husband's arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

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Lois marched swiftly through the corridors of STAR Labs towards Dr Klein's office; she had called ahead to ascertain that he was in and would be available to see her. She tapped sharply on the door of his laboratory and walked in at his invitation. The scientist was bent over a microscope, an assistant beside him scribbling things down on a clipboard. He didn't immediately look up, so Lois waited; after a couple of minutes, when he still seemed oblivious to her presence, she coughed loudly.

"Umm... oh, Ms Lane!" He straightened, seeming surprised to see you.

"Yes - you did say you could talk to me now," she reminded him.

"Oh, I did, didn't I...?" He glanced around uncertainly for a moment, then seemed to recall himself to his surroundings. "Claire, that'll be all for now," he said crisply to the assistant. "I'll call you when I need you again."

She nodded and quickly left the lab. "I assume you wanted to talk in private?" Klein asked Lois once the door had closed behind the assistant.

"Yes. Please," she replied, determined to remain calm and matter-of-fact about this, but finding that her voice was shaking all the same.

"Ms Lane - Lois - are you all right?" Far from being embarrassed or awkward at her obvious emotional state, Klein's voice was surprisingly gentle.

She pulled herself together swiftly. "Yes, I'm fine. It's just... Dr Klein, I need to talk to you about Superman and this meteor."

His surprise was evident, although he quickly tried to school his features into a puzzled look. But Lois was having none of this. She knew that Bernard Klein knew all about the UN's request - Clark had told her. Although he hadn't been present at the previous day's meeting, he had been consulted by EPRAD and had given his professional opinion that Superman would indeed be capable of destroying the meteor, albeit at the cost of his life.

"Dr Klein... Bernie - Superman's told me all about it. Clark and me, that is. I know, he was sworn to secrecy, but we're his friends. And you don't need to worry that we'll print it - you should know us well enough by now to know that we can keep secrets."

"Oh, I do!" he assured her quickly. "It's just... oh dear, I really can't think... I don't know what to say!"

"No? You were quick enough to tell EPRAD that Superman could destroy this thing," Lois flung back at the uncomfortable-looking scientist. "Even though it would kill him."

"Oh my..." Dr Klein muttered, clutching onto the counter for support. "Lois - please, you have to understand that Superman's death is the last thing I want! Superman is... well, I consider him to be my friend! I'm his personal physician, in a way, and I... am really very fond of him. The last thing I ever wanted was.... Oh, dear Lord, Lois, you can't believe I want him to do this!"

Lois grimaced. Bernard Klein was not the villain here; it seemed he was pretty distressed about the whole thing. Which was good, she told herself. It meant he would be on her side; they could work together to find an alternative solution.

She sighed and stared directly at the scientist, waiting for him to meet her gaze. He did after a moment, and the agony on his expression was clear to see. He ran one hand agitatedly over his bald temples, clearly not knowing what to say to her.

"Bernie." Her voice was deliberately calm, though she had not felt calm inside since the shock of the previous evening. "I need you to help me. We have to think logically on this. There *\*must\** be another

way to deal with this... \*thing\* which doesn't involve Superman having to kill himself!"

"But... we've done all the calculations, over and over! We ran the data through the computers hundreds of times, ran simulations, tested dozens of hypothesis... Lois, it all came back to the same result. The electro magnetic pulse would be lethal, there would be little chance of any life surviving on the planet. The only thing that can possibly save the Earth from being destroyed is if Superman flies into space and destroys the meteor."

"And you know that it's Kryptonite? What that'll do to him?" Lois pointed out grittily.

Klein sighed heavily. "I know... oh, God, I know! And I wish there was another way - no-one could want that more than I do!"

< You'd be surprised> Lois thought grimly. She raised her gaze to the scientist's again. "No bombs - nuclear weapons?"

"The effect would be catastrophic, Lois!" Klein protested agitatedly.

"So you say... but just what would EPRAD, the government, the UN, the whole damn lot of you have done if Superman hadn't been here in the first place?" Lois demanded angrily. That was just one of the things which had been bugging her since early morning. Oh, she knew that most of the time, when he was contacted, Clark was glad to help. That was what he saw as his duty. But there were so many times when the official requests for help turned out to be for things which the military, the UN, the emergency services \*could\* handle themselves, though it would take a little longer and be a little more expensive. Superman was too much of an easy option sometimes.

Klein blinked. "If we didn't have Superman.... Lois, this isn't like the Nightfall Asteroid. Then, if Superman hadn't been here, the nuclear option could have worked. This time, this thing is so much bigger, and since we already know the properties of Kryptonite... it would be so radioactive by the time the pieces hit Earth it would be off the scale of a Geiger counter. We'd be looking at total annihilation."

"Why can't he just push it a little - you know, to throw it off course, alter its trajectory?" Lois suggested then as the idea occurred to her. "Surely he'd be able to do that!"

But Klein slumped back against his lab counter. "We've been through that as well. I know Superman's capabilities better than anyone, Lois, even almost better than he does himself. It's not just that it's set on its course and pushing it aside would be tough, even for someone with his powers. But he's going to start losing his powers as soon as he gets close to the thing and that's going to make it impossible. Our only chance is for him to fly at it as hard as he can and smash it with his body. If he manages to plant some explosives at the same time, then that's even better. Better still if he retains his powers for long enough to direct some of the larger pieces away from Earth, though EPRAD say they can deal with fragments as long as they're not radioactive, which they would be if they used nuclear weapons...." The scientist trailed off, realising that he had drifted off the original subject. "But pushing it requires more time than



he'll have once his powers start to go." Klein sighed deeply, his expression again revealing his own deep depression.

Lois began to pace, throwing her arms about as she thought frantically, muttering simultaneously. "Damn military... never can solve their own problems... why does everyone assume Superman will just do what they ask him...."

Bernard Klein jumped back in alarm as her pacing took her close to him, but she retreated again as she continued to think. Suddenly she stopped dead and stared at him.

"A lead suit! You know, like a diving suit - couldn't he wear something like that?" she threw at him.

Klein's eyes lit up briefly as he grasped the idea, only to dull again after a second or two. "No, it wouldn't work. Lead is really too soft to be made into a suit anyway, and apart from that Superman would need pure and unbroken coverage to protect him from the Kryptonite. Pure lead will just tear as soon as he tries to use his strength, in which case it's worse than useless." He began to pace his laboratory, one hand stroking his bald head agitatedly as he spoke. "This is going to be the most intense Kryptonite Superman has ever faced. We just don't know how effective lead would be as a shield against it, but it would have to be 100% pure lead, not leaded glass or anything like that - and that'd mean he wouldn't be able to see what he was doing!"

Barely pausing for breath, Klein continued, "And his powers don't really work adequately through lead. Oh, I know he's used his Super-breath in a lead-lined room, but the tests I've run so far suggest that it's unlikely that he'd be able to fly easily or quickly, or use his Super-strength to punch a hole in the meteor. And even if he was able to fly as normal, and if he could manage to use his powers in such a way that he didn't tear the lead, it's so cold in outer space the lead would freeze and then shatter on impact, and he'd be just as vulnerable to the Kryptonite."

Lois visibly slumped. "So you're telling me there's no alternative?" she whispered despairingly.

"I'm afraid so," Klein said sadly. "Lois, I hate this as much as you do.... I really wished I'd never met Superman when I realised why EPRAD wanted to talk to me."

Realising again that this man really did care about Superman as a person in a way, perhaps, that no-one else did, Lois smiled wryly at him. "No, I'm glad you're his doctor, Bernie. At least I know I can trust you to look out for his interests - I'm not sure anyone else would. You've shown us before how much you care about him. Clark and I will always be grateful to you for that, and I know Superman is too."

Klein met her gaze and returned her weak smile with a sad one of his own. "I'll never forget him, Lois. He is the most... the most honourable, decent man I have ever met."

"I know," she whispered, then turned and hurried from the lab before her emotions could get the better of her once again.

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It was late morning by the time Clark arrived at the newsroom; he glanced around quickly but there was no sign of Lois. A closer examination of her desk confirmed that her purse was missing, which suggested that she had gone out somewhere. He couldn't help experiencing a swift sensation of relief; since they couldn't talk properly at the Planet, he hadn't been looking forward to working close to her all day with the knowledge that they still needed to discuss things hanging over them. He wasn't even sure what he could say to her when they did get a chance to talk. She had been adamant the night before that she didn't want him to go; but even if millions of people's lives weren't at risk, there were David and Beth to consider. He couldn't reconcile abandoning them to their fate, even if Lois didn't care about herself.

And anyway, even if she took the view that she didn't want to go on living if he was dead - which she had choked out at one point while she'd been crying in his arms - she had no choice, as he saw it. Beth and David needed her. They couldn't let them be orphaned.

He was sure that in the cold light of day Lois would be seeing things differently; he just wished that he hadn't had to go out before dawn. At least he would have had a chance to see her, talk to her - however briefly - before they'd had to get the children dressed.

Grimacing, he turned his attention to his computer and, once he'd dealt with his email and other urgent work at something approaching Super-speed, he began to compile a list of things which he would need to deal with over the next few days. Sort out all the paperwork relating to the house, make sure all bills were paid up to date, find out the rules of the Planet's insurance plan as part of making sure that Lois and the kids would be financially secure... they had both made wills shortly after they'd been married, and when first Beth and then David had been born they'd amended them, so there should be no problems there. The biggest problem would be coming up with an explanation for what had happened to Clark Kent, but Clark thought he could probably find a way around that. He'd have to discuss it with Lois - or would she not want to talk about it?

Lois.... Suddenly he sensed her presence; glancing around, he saw her exit the elevator. Quickly he saved his document, creating several levels of password in order to prevent any accidental access - including access by Lois - and pulled up a file relating to one of their current investigations. By the time she reached his desk, he was adding some text to the document. He turned to smile at her, noticing the strain in her expression and the evidence of redness around her eyes. She'd been crying again.

"Hi honey," he murmured softly. "I missed you."

That had been the wrong thing to say, he realised as soon as he saw her flinch; his words had obviously made her realise that \*she\* would be missing him on a permanent basis very soon. He closed his eyes briefly as he tried to think of a way to recover, but as he returned his gaze to her face he saw her force a brief smile.

"I had to go out," she explained uninformatively. "What have we got?"

Clark sighed inwardly; she was giving him clear clues that she wanted to steer conversation away from the personal. Though wasn't that what he'd wanted himself? He'd admitted that they couldn't discuss the real issue at work, and it would be far too difficult to carry on as if there was nothing wrong in the interim. Reaching out with a long arm and snagging a nearby chair, he pulled it up to his desk so that she could sit beside him as they worked.

But it wasn't as easy as he'd hoped to concentrate on work, and as noon was approaching he turned his head so that he was looking straight into Lois's eyes. As she met his gaze, her reaction was almost like a startled deer; her eyes widened and she almost backed away from him.

He caught her arm in a gentle grip. "Hey, honey, what is it?"

"Nothing - you just took me by surprise, that's all," she replied, her eyes darting to the side.

"Come on," he said quietly. "Let's get out of here - we're due a break for lunch, and I can take us somewhere quiet... we can talk...."

He wasn't prepared for her reaction. "No!" Backing away, Lois got to her feet and started to move away from his desk. "I need to... there are things I have to do... I don't have time, Clark." She turned and, mindful of the other staff in the bullpen, walked casually to her own desk.

It had been a long time since Lois had shut him out over something, but Clark felt shut out now. He couldn't even understand why: surely, with this meteor hanging over them, she understood the need for them to talk to each other, to share their fears? They had to make the most of every precious moment they could still have together. She \*had\* to understand that - but why was she refusing to acknowledge it?

About to follow her to her desk and challenge it, he halted abruptly as his Super-hearing cut in. A plane was in distress on its approach to Metropolis Airport; he'd have to go and help.

As he soared high above the rooftops of the city on his way to the emergency, it crossed his mind to wonder, with a wry twist of his lips, how the city - the country - would cope without him.

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She had hurt Clark earlier, Lois knew, and guilt was now eating away at her. She had known, while they had been working side by side at his desk, that he was hurting inside. He hadn't needed to say anything; he was her husband and she knew him almost as well as he knew himself. The enormity of what he was contemplating doing some time in the next couple of weeks had to be terrifying him, quite apart from the fact that he had to face the reality of leaving his wife and children to go on without him.

Was this how it felt to have a partner with a terminal, incurable illness? She wasn't sure; perhaps it was, but then there was usually

no-one to blame. Lois wanted to scream at the government and UN bureaucrats who'd felt that they had the right to demand that her husband sacrifice everything because they couldn't manage to come up with some other solution to this impending disaster.

But then, Dr Klein had seemed convinced that there was no other solution, she reminded herself slowly. Either Superman destroyed the meteor, or it would destroy the planet or a good part of its population. And - she was sure those same bureaucrats were arguing - what's one life against many millions?

That was the question Clark had also faced, she knew. He had tried to explain it to her the previous evening, but she'd still been in a state of denial over the whole thing. She knew Clark too well to believe that he would ever put his own well-being or happiness above that of other people - especially when some of them were people he loved. She had already recognised that he would do what had been asked of him. And, having spoken to Dr Klein, she would support him. She didn't want him to go - oh, how could she face losing him? But he would go with her love and support, even if not with her encouragement.

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"Lois - sweetheart - we need to talk," Clark said gently as he returned downstairs from putting the children to bed. He had taken longer than usual over the task, partly because he was aware that there wouldn't be many more opportunities and he wanted to cherish his family while he had the time to do so, but also partly because, he was aware, he was subconsciously putting off the task of talking with Lois. He wasn't sure whether she would still try to avoid the conversation, and he couldn't allow that to continue. Not that it was a discussion he particularly wanted to have either, he reflected grimly.

But she came over to him, slipping her arms around his waist and resting her head against his chest. "I know, Clark. I've... been shutting you out today, and I'm sorry," she whispered.

He enfolded her tightly in his arms. "I don't blame you, honey. This has got to be the hardest thing we've ever faced, and unlike some of the other things we've been through in the past, we're not going to get out of this one unscathed."

She leaned back against his arms, her face tilted upwards so that he could see the pain in her wide brown eyes. "\*You're\* not. Oh, Clark, I love you so much and I don't want to lose you!" Tears glistened in her eyes, and he instantly cradled her in his arms, sweeping her up and carrying her to the sofa where he sat with her on his lap, stroking her hair as she sobbed into his shirt.

Some time later, she lifted her head and gazed at him again. "I know you have to do this. I don't want you to, but the alternative is far worse, isn't it?"

"Lois, I can't allow the alternative to happen if there's anything I can do to prevent it," he told her heavily.

"I know," she murmured. "That's always been one of the things I love about you - you always need to do what's right. You never compromise

about that. You are the most decent, truly \*good\* man I have ever known, or ever will know, Clark."

He swallowed; he'd promised himself that he wouldn't get emotional over this with Lois. It had been bad enough that morning with his parents. But it was so hard....

"I went to see Mom and Dad this morning," he told her, and related the events of his visit to Smallville to her.

"I'd like them to come here," Lois agreed quietly. "I think... it could help. Anyway, they'll want to say goodbye to you too when you...." She trailed off, unable to finish the statement.

"Yeah," he agreed thoughtfully. "Lois, we need to talk about when - I mean, the EPRAD people need to know, and there are other things I'll need to do before...."

"Oh, God, Clark, we have to \*plan\* when you're going to die!" Lois exclaimed, her voice cracking as she stared in horror at him.

He closed his eyes briefly; he'd known some of this would be difficult. "Lois, honey, you know I have to make plans. If it'll help you, I could not tell you when I'm going to go - but do you really want me to walk in one evening and tell you that I'm leaving the next morning? Don't you want some say in this?"

Lois was silent for a few moments, then she asked, "What latitude do we have?"

Clark shrugged. "I have about two weeks, they reckon. And they'd prefer me to set off in the early morning, but beyond that it seems to be up to me as long as I give them notice."

"Okay, two weeks' time then," Lois stated abruptly.

Clark tightened his hold on her, resting his chin on her head briefly. "I can... but is the waiting, the knowing it's going to happen, going to be too much for you?"

"Clark!" she almost shouted at him. "What do you think - that I want you gone tomorrow? If you're telling me that I can only have up to two weeks more with my husband, the man I love more than... more than I ever thought I could love anyone, then I want every single day of those two weeks!"

< Oh, sweetheart....> Clark felt as if his heart was breaking for her. "Lois, do you really think we can carry on as normal at work for the next couple of weeks, with this hanging over us?"

"Then we'll take vacation time," she retorted.

"Honey... you'll probably need it afterwards," he pointed out softly.

"Afterwards...." She stared at him wide-eyed. "How are we going to explain... Clark, when you left for New Krypton I know part of the reason we didn't have a cover story was that neither of us wanted to face the possibility that you wouldn't be back very soon. This time... Oh, God...!" Tears shimmered in her luminous eyes.

"Lois, I'll see to it, trust me," Clark assured her gently. "If you want to discuss it, we can - but the easiest thing would be for me to fake some sort of accident. And I'm going to do some research in the next couple of days on the Planet's insurance plan's rules. It probably won't pay out until I'm officially declared dead, though, so you'll have to wait a while. But you'll have our savings account and your salary still...."

"Clark!" Lois stopped his flow of words by shaking him. "As if I care about money right now - "

"Honey, you'll have to. You'll have two kids and a house to support on one income," he pointed out.

She nodded bleakly, accepting that he was right. "Clark... I just wish there was some other way," she choked out eventually.

"Me too," he agreed huskily.

"I talked to Dr Klein today," she continued quietly. "It's okay - I didn't give away your secret. But I needed to know whether he thought there was an alternative.... He didn't," she added at his questioning look. "We talked about it for a while - he's really upset too, Clark. I really had no idea how close he feels to Superman."

Yes, the scientist would be upset, Clark reflected. He - as Superman - had become very close to Bernie Klein over the years, far closer than he had allowed himself to become to anyone else who didn't know the secret of his identity. And Dr Klein had been the one to confirm not only Superman's ability to destroy the meteor, but the certain eventuality that he would die in doing so. Yes, Bernie would be devastated. He would have to visit the scientist, assure him that Superman bore him no ill-will.

And there was something else....

"Lois - what would you think if I said I wanted to tell Bernie who I am?" he asked suddenly. "I really think we can trust him - I \*know\* we can trust him. There've been so many times when he came through for us - he even disobeyed government orders once for me. And also," he continued carefully, "there's Beth and David. I know they're just normal kids at the moment, but at some point they'll probably develop Super-powers and invulnerability. They'll need a doctor who understands - and I can't think of anyone I'd trust to take care of my kids other than Dr Klein." Clark paused again, studying Lois's face in an attempt to detect a reaction. She was still, listening to him. "I know your father's a doctor, honey, and I'll always be grateful to him for saving my life that Christmas, but he's not an expert in Kryptonian physiology. Bernie Klein is."

Lois stroked his face for a few moments before answering. "Clark, if you want to tell him, I'm happy with it. You're right, we can trust him. And I know I'll have your parents, but I think it will help me to have someone else I can really talk to about you - the \*real\* you, not Superman, not Clark, but the whole person. Beth and David are too young to understand, and they won't remember you like I do - I will." Tears trickled down her cheeks again and Clark brushed them away gently with his fingertips.

"Then we'll tell Bernie. And is there anyone else...? Your parents?" Clark hesitated suddenly as he realised that Lois could tell anyone she liked the truth about him once he'd gone; and yet somehow he knew that she would take his secret to her own grave, partly out of love for him, and partly to protect their children.

"Maybe," she replied huskily. "Perry, perhaps."

He nodded. "If you want. To be honest, I'd like that as well. You know it's always been important for me to protect my identity, but it's been really tough lying to people I consider close friends. I \*know\* Perry would never tell anyone - he may be Editor-in-Chief of the Planet, but he'd never betray us." < And I'd like to be able to say goodbye to him honestly when it comes time to leave, rather than just walk away and have him discover some time later that Clark Kent is missing, presumed dead...>

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Lois watched Clark playing with the children the following morning with a sense of desperation in her heart. It was clear that he was determined to make the most of the time he had left; although he had always been a loving and attentive father, this morning he seemed to be giving Beth and David even more of his attention. They loved it, of course, laughing and shrieking as he carried them, one under each arm, from the kitchen back up to the bathroom to get washed before leaving.

In that moment, Lois realised that she had been unfair to Clark: since he'd told her about what he had to do, she had only been thinking of her own and the children's loss. But Clark had voluntarily agreed to give up everything he held dear, the life and the family he had wanted so badly. She couldn't imagine what it had cost him to make that decision.

But watching him with their children had raised another issue, and once David had been dropped off at his nursery and they were alone in the car, Lois turned to Clark.

"What do you think we should tell Beth and David?"

He stilled, his hands clenching on the wheel, before he gave her a wry smile. "Nothing. How can we? David's far too young to understand, and Beth... even if she did understand, how could she cope with knowing I'm leaving? I know it'll be tough for her afterwards, but I don't want her knowing before I go." Lois saw the tiny muscle twitching in her husband's jaw and knew that she was right about his innermost feelings. He was hating this as much, if not more, than she was.

"I guess you're right," she agreed. "We'll just have to make the most of the time we have with them as a family." Maybe it would be a good idea to take some vacation time after all, Lois mused; they could take Beth out of school and just spend all their time with each other and the children. Maybe they could go somewhere on their own - Clark could fly them somewhere, perhaps. They'd kept Superman away from the kids as much as possible, but just for once it wouldn't be a problem. They were far too young to know that the Man of Steel was their father, but if Clark was careful they probably wouldn't recognise him.

Clark's voice intruded on her thoughts. "Lois - how about telling Jimmy as well? He's been a great friend to both of us, and I... well, I admit I'd be happier knowing that he knows the truth and will be looking out for you and the kids too. And...." He trailed off, taking a long indrawn breath instead.

"And you want him to know who you really are before it's too late?" Lois prompted softly. The request hadn't surprised her; she'd expected it after Clark's comments about Dr Klein and Perry the previous evening. And it would be good to know that Jimmy was someone else she could talk to about Clark in the future. "Yeah - you want to tell them today?" she added.

Clark nodded. "Later."

It was several hours later when Clark came to Lois's desk and jerked his head towards the other side of the newsroom. Jimmy had just arrived back from an assignment, his camera in his hand; these days Perry encouraged him to combine his talent for photography with reporting. He was now one of the more talented of the junior staffers at the Planet: no longer a gopher or trainee photographer, he was in line for promotion to senior reporter the next time there was a vacancy. Jimmy Olsen at twenty-nine still had the irrepressible sense of humour he'd possessed at twenty-one, but now alongside that he had a strong sense of responsibility and dedication to the job.

Lois went to get Jimmy and Clark headed towards the Editor-in-Chief's office.

"Chief - Lois and I want a word. In private, if you don't mind."

The serious tone of Clark's voice had Perry White frowning as he looked up. "Sure, Clark - you want to shut the door?"

"Well, actually we'd prefer to use one of the offices upstairs, if that's okay."

Perry raised an eyebrow, but followed Clark out of his office and towards the elevator. Lois and Jimmy joined them, to Perry's obvious surprise, but neither he nor Jimmy asked any questions. In the upstairs office, Clark closed the door and Lois noticed that he discreetly lowered his glasses for a brief moment. Checking that no-one was in either of the next-door rooms, she assumed.

"So what's this about, you two?" Perry asked crisply. "Better be important, dragging us all the way up here like this."

"It's important," Lois replied abruptly, in a brittle tone which earned her a raised eyebrow and very curious look from Jimmy.

"Lois..." Clark murmured, before turning to his colleagues and friends. "We have two things we want to tell you about. But before we can tell you about either of them, we have to have your word that none of this goes outside this room. This is *\*not\** for publication, okay?"

Jimmy agreed quickly; Perry gave his star reporters an assessing



stare before nodding slowly. "If you tell me this is confidential, then I respect that."

Clark nodded in acknowledgement. "First, I should tell you that there is a meteor heading for Earth which, if it impacts in four months' time as predicted, will destroy the planet."

"Judas Priest!"

"Holy cow!"

Two astounded faces stared at Clark as two jaws almost hit the floor. "Hold on," Clark continued hurriedly. "Yeah, this is serious, but as you can imagine the government, the UN, all the top scientists have been working together to find a way to deal with it. Remember the Nightfall asteroid?"

"How could I forget?" Jimmy demanded with a low whistle.

"Yeah, I remember," Perry commented slowly. "That sure was a close call - I remember putting together what I thought for sure was the last ever edition of the Daily Planet. And Alice was away with the boys...."

"But Superman saved the day!" Jimmy remembered. "Hey - you mean that's what's going to happen - Superman's going to destroy this one too?"

"Well, he'll have a darned good try," Clark replied ruefully.

"Clark, you telling me the Planet can't report this?" Perry interjected before Clark could continue.

Clark sighed. "I'm telling you that for now the UN and the government are trying to keep a lid on it - they don't want mass panic at this stage. I know it's not our job to help them suppress news, but...." He paused, then seemed to draw himself up to his full height, his jaw becoming taut.

"But it's more complicated than I've told you so far," he added after a moment. "This meteor is part of an exploded planet, and the planet is Krypton."

Jimmy's shocked response this time was predictable, but Perry's took Clark by surprise. The sixty-year-old editor drew in a sharp breath and fixed his gaze first on Clark and then on Lois, a strange, watchful expression on his face.

"CK - you're saying this could kill Superman?" Jimmy asked, his face suddenly pale.

"Yeah. Not could - will," Clark agreed. "Within the next couple of weeks - that's the time window EPRAD's given."

"But there must be another way!" Jimmy demanded.

"We've been through all that," Lois put in tiredly. "Superman's the only option. It seems it's either him or all or most of the Earth's population."

"When you put it like that...." Jimmy muttered, still visibly shaken.

This was where it got harder, Clark told himself, and deliberately straightened up. "I told you there were two things. The meteor is the first. The second is...." He paused briefly. "I wanted to tell you this myself, and please believe me that there were good reasons for keeping it secret before."

Ensuring that his listeners' attention was focused on him, he undid the knot of his tie and quickly opened the first three buttons of his shirt so that the Suit under his clothes became visible. Jimmy's expression grew puzzled as the blue Spandex came into view, the top of the S shield just about visible. Perry, however, remained still.

"I'm Superman," he explained quietly.

"Wow... CK, that's... I don't believe it!" Jimmy exclaimed, then swiftly putting the two pieces of news together in his mind, he took a sharp intake of breath. "Clark... \*you\* have to go and... Oh God!"

"Yeah," Lois whispered. "That's pretty much what I thought."

"You poor kids," Perry muttered. "I could never have imagined.... Look, Lois, Clark, if there's anything I can do, or the Planet...?"

"Yeah, me too," Jimmy interjected quickly. "Look, I can't imagine what you two are going through, but you're two of my best friends and there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

"I know, Jimmy," Clark assured him quietly. "And I'll be a lot happier knowing you're looking out for Lois and the kids." Jimmy nodded, swallowing. He glanced swiftly at Clark then. "Look, I know this isn't really the time, but - Clark, you've saved my life more times than I can remember. I just want to say thanks, buddy."

On impulse Clark crossed the small room to stand in front of his friend, then swept Jimmy into a brief, warm hug. "You're welcome, Jimmy. That's what friends are for, huh?" Releasing the younger man, Clark added quietly so that only Jimmy could hear, "Take Lois back downstairs for me, please?"

Jimmy stepped back and turned towards Lois. "Better get back to work - Lois, got a minute? I could use some advice...?"

Clark saw Lois throw him a questioning look; he smiled briefly at her and signalled with his eyes. She got the message and followed Jimmy out, leaving Clark alone with the editor.

"You knew, Chief," Clark said; a statement, not a question.

Perry nodded.

"For how long?"

The editor shrugged. "Few years. I guessed around the time you'd been

here two years, then when you left with those New Kryptonians I was sure. The way you looked at Lois, you being shut up in my office with Jonathan and Martha Kent before you left - well, it was pretty obvious then."

Clark stilled. "I guess I was a little careless."

"Well, you don't get to be a man in my position without noticing a few things," the editor drawled. "But none of that's important, Clark. How the heck are you going to do this - and how in tarnation can you leave Lois and those beautiful kids behind?"

Clark sighed heavily. "Chief, I have no idea. But what I do know is that I have no choice. It's every bit as bad as I told you."

"Yeah, I can see that. Clark, I... I just don't know what to say." The editor straightened, pulled himself together. "What can I do to help?"

"Well, I do need to check out a few things - like how Lois will be off financially, since all I can do to cover my absence is arrange that Clark Kent 'disappears,' presumed dead. I don't know how long it will take before the Planet's insurance plan pays out the death benefit." Clark sighed again, glancing down at his hands.

"That's where I can help, son," Perry replied firmly. "You leave that to me - you're still on payroll at the Planet, and you will be until there's an official confirmation that Clark Kent, not Superman, is dead. I'll make sure of that."

Clark removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, more relieved than he wanted to let on that Perry had removed that particular worry from his mind. "Chief, thank you. That's one less thing to worry about."

The editor was looking at him, shaking his head slowly. "I've known about you for six or seven years, Clark, and yet, seeing you in your work clothes but without your glasses... you have no idea how different you look."

"So I've been told," Clark murmured in a voice laced with irony.

"Right - one more thing before I get back to work," Perry added. "As of now, you and Lois are on paid leave. So you collect your wife and both of you get on out of here."

"Thanks, Chief," Clark responded heavily. "I won't say I'm not grateful. And... I'll see you again before I... you know," he gestured vaguely.

"I know you will, son," the editor replied quietly. "Go on, now."

Clark exited the room, grateful for his boss's understanding. Surprised that Perry didn't immediately follow him, he glanced back and caught an expression of deep sadness on the older man's face.

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Clark had obviously wanted to talk to Perry alone, Lois realised as she followed Jimmy out of the small office; even after six years of marriage his protective instincts were still as strong as ever. She was taken by surprise when Jimmy touched her arm.

"Lois? Are you... okay?"

She turned and threw him an impatient look; what did he think? She was going to lose the man she loved more than anything in the world, in less than two weeks!

"Okay... look, I'm sorry, that was insensitive," Jimmy added hurriedly. "It's... I just can't imagine what you and Clark are going through right now."

No, he couldn't, Lois mused; no-one could. Even Martha and Jonathan - she had spoken to them on the phone early that morning, and it was clear that they were devastated as well, appalled at the prospect of Clark's certain death. But the fact that they were hurting as much as she was meant that she felt awkward at telling them just how she felt; she didn't want to add to their pain.

She turned to Jimmy and gave him a wry half-smile. "Sorry. Yeah, it's tough."

He caught her arm suddenly. "Come and have a coffee with me," he urged. "The place down the street should be pretty quiet right now, and we can talk. Or you talk, I'll listen. Whatever you might think, I can be a pretty good listener, Lois."

Yes, maybe he could, she reflected. And it would help to talk to someone who wasn't as intimately involved with the situation. "Yeah, I'd like that, Jimmy. Thanks."

"It must be pretty scary for you both," he said hesitantly after a while, as they exited the Planet building.

"Scary... yeah, you could say that," she agreed with an ironic laugh. "I don't even want to \*think\* of Clark actually doing this thing... flying out into space on his own, and the Kryptonite... I've seen what he's like when he's been affected by it before, and it always tears me up inside to see him. But this time... there'll be no-one to help him, no-one to take it away from him..." She swallowed, then forced herself to continue. "He'll die. Probably in pain, and no-one will be with him to comfort him. And I hate the thought of that. And I don't even know what'll happen to him. He'll be outside the Earth's atmosphere, so there's no gravity, so his body's unlikely to fall back down to Earth - so does that mean he'll just float around in space? He'll freeze, or get bloated, or both? Or explode? Maybe he'll even get caught up in the explosion when the meteor blows." She stopped abruptly, blinked a few times, then forced herself to calm a little.

Jimmy remained silent, simply listening, and Lois took the opportunity to let out a number of the fears and thoughts which she had been locking up inside. "And besides Clark... it scares me to think of a future without him in my life, Jimmy. You know what I used to be like, before he came to the Planet - you know how hard he worked to get me to notice him and accept him. And... and I never

could have believed I'd love anyone so much. He is all I ever dreamed of in a man, and far more besides." She swallowed again. "And now I'm going to lose him. Our kids will grow up forgetting what he looks like, what his voice sounded like, how it felt to be held in his arms... they'll never know how it feels to fly in his arms...." Her voice trailed off.

"Lois...." Jimmy's hand was on her arm in a comforting gesture. "We'll tell them all about him, you know we will. You, me, Perry, his parents... we'll make sure they don't forget him. And you have videos, photos, right? They'll know him. Not the same way we know him, but he won't be just a name to them. And he'll never be that to us."

It had been a good suggestion of Jimmy's, she thought an hour later as they returned to the Planet. She'd got rid of a lot of anger: against the government and other agencies who seemed to think that Superman was simply theirs to command; against people in general who would have no idea just what a sacrifice Superman - and his family - were making for them, and would probably not even be grateful; against whatever fates had conspired to rob her and Clark of their happiness.

And Jimmy had been as good as his word; he had listened, not commenting other than to make sympathetic noises, and had joined her on the bench-seat at her side of the table when tears had overflowed yet again; he had held her head against his shoulder and let her cry. When her tears had dried, he had assured her that she could call on him for help any time she wanted, for babysitting, help around the house, or any time she wanted company. She'd forced a smile and suggested that it would play havoc with his love life.

"Some things are more important," he'd replied soberly before getting up to accompany her back to the newsroom. Clark was sitting on the edge of her desk as they walked in; he raised his head to smile at her.

"I'm sorry - we went for a coffee..." she began to explain. But he shook his head.

"No problem. I wondered where you'd gone, but then I went out and looked...." He made their private signal for his flying. "I'm glad you had a chance to talk to someone, and Jimmy's a good guy." Standing up and wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he added, "Come on - Perry's just told us we're on vacation, so I reckon we should get out of here before he changes his mind."

"Perry's given us time off?" Lois demanded as they descended to the parking garage.

Clark nodded. "He's right, honey - I certainly can't concentrate on reporting right now. Can you?"

She shrugged. "I wanted to take time off anyway. I want to spend the time we have with \*you,\* not with the Planet staff and half of Metropolis." She paused and studied her husband's face. "What were you talking to Perry about?"

He shifted position before answering, leaning against the elevator wall with his hands deep in his pockets. "He knew, Lois. About me, I

mean."

"That you're Superman?" she asked quietly.

Clark nodded. "He's known for years, honey - but he never said a word."

For \*years\*? Lois stared at Clark as she tried to assimilate that information. Did that mean that Perry had known before she had? How had he found out anyway? Clark's gaze met hers and he smiled at her, his brown eyes twinkling.

"I think he guessed first around the same time you did, love," he murmured softly, the smile still hovering around his mouth. "But he said he wasn't sure until I left with Zara and Ching."

"I guess... we were a little open with our feelings for each other then," Lois replied thoughtfully, wondering who else might have realised. But on the other hand, Jimmy had been there as well and clearly hadn't figured anything out.

"It's always been hard for me to hide how much I love you," Clark commented, a husky note to his voice as his unblinking gaze held hers. "Even before you knew I was Superman, there were times when I just had to fly away before I gave myself away completely."

Lois took the couple of steps which took her to his side, and he enveloped her in his arms. She strained up towards him and his lips descended to claim hers, his kiss hungry and driven by desperation as they clung to each other. The elevator door opened at the parking level, but they were oblivious to it.

He let her go after a few moments, hitting the button to hold the door open before leading her out. "Lois - that's why I don't want you to be there when I leave," he said abruptly as they walked to the Jeep.

She frowned, unsure what he meant.

"At EPRAD - I'll be taking off from there," he explained. "I don't want you to come."

Lois stopped abruptly, stunned. What was he saying? He didn't \*want\* her there, didn't want to let her share his very last minutes on Earth, their last chance to say goodbye? A lump sprang up in her throat, threatening to choke her. "Clark...?"

"Oh, Lois...!" He pulled her against him, his arm around her shoulder. "Honey - don't misunderstand, please! It's just - it's going to be tough enough for me to leave you as it is. If you're there... and I know how hard it's going to be for you... if you were there, I just might not be able to do it. And - there's no way I could hide how hard it'll be for me to leave you, and you're not going to be able to hide your feelings either. But for Beth and David's sake, we can't let people know who Superman really is. You know that."

She supposed that made sense, but that lump in her throat just refused to disappear as a vision entered her head of Clark, in his Superman suit, surrounded by virtual strangers as he made his last

lonely journey. "Will Dr Klein - Bernie - be there?"

He shrugged. "I don't know - I guess I could ask him. On the other hand... well, I think I'd prefer to say goodbye to people I care about in private."

He opened the car door for her and joined her a couple of seconds later. "What do you want to do for the next couple of weeks, then?"

< Hold you and never let you go...> "Just be together - you, me and the kids," she answered quietly. "And if you want Jonathan and Martha to come...?"

"Yeah, that'd be good. You want to go somewhere? A cabin in the mountains, maybe?"

That sounded good. Yes, they could go away for a few days, maybe a week, to spend some time on their own without interruptions. "I'd like that, Clark."

He nodded. "I can arrange it - one of the guys I shoot baskets with has a place he lets people use when he isn't there. We could go tomorrow if he's not using it. It won't matter if Beth misses a few days of school right now."

"No - spending time with her father is far more important for her," Lois retorted, a little acerbically. Clark shot her a sharp glance, but remained silent.

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"Lois, tell me honestly - do you think I'm not putting you and the kids first?" They'd just got home, and Lois had barely closed the door of the town house before Clark had swung around and thrown his bitter question at her.

"Clark...?"

"Come on - you made it clear in the car! That jibe about Beth spending time with her father - you think \*I\* want to miss out on her growing up?" Clark's manner was agitated; he paced about the living-room with his arms outflung as he threw the angry question at her.

"It wasn't a jibe - "

"No? Sure sounded like it to me!" he retorted, his voice rising. "Lois, just who do you think is getting the rough deal here? You think I \*want\* to run off and leave my family every time some emergency comes up, lose out on spending time with my kids, leave you to cope alone, spend days digging people out after an earthquake when I could be playing with my son and daughter? There've been times I was afraid they'd barely know who I am, that they'd think I was just some stranger who comes to see their mom now and then!" He stopped abruptly, then strode to the window and stared out, continuing in little more than a choked whisper, "Now all my worst fears are coming true. David won't remember me at all - I'll just be some guy in a photo, and Beth'll just about remember me, as the father who walked out on her." He swung back to face her suddenly. "Lois, I promised

you I'd be a better father than your dad was to you and Lucy. But... I'm going to be far worse, and I can't do a damn thing about it!"

Lois had listened to his tormented accusations in silence, struggling to fight back her own tears; she'd spent too much time crying lately. She'd had no idea Clark had felt that way about having to leave his family to go and be Superman; although she sometimes found his absences frustrating, she'd tended to assume that he simply accepted it, that it was all part of the role he'd assumed when he'd put on the Suit for the first time. And yet... she ought to have known, should have understood. She'd had his powers for several days, and she'd known how difficult it was to have anything approaching a normal life when there were so many demands on a Super-hero's time. He was perfectly right to suggest that she'd been insensitive, ignoring his feelings while concentrating on her own pain.

She crossed the room quickly and wrapped her arms around his stiff, unyielding body. "Clark... I never realised. I should have understood. I'm so sorry."

He remained very still for a moment, then his arms closed tightly around her, so tightly that she knew she'd have bruises, but she didn't care. Right now he needed comfort, and she would give it.

"Clark - it's not selfish to want to tell them you won't do it!" she insisted firmly, freeing her hands so that she could cup his face, seeing the unshed tears in the desperately sad brown eyes.

He inhaled deeply before replying. "No? And you think I could live with myself if I didn't?"

"Clark, do you think I could live with myself if I pleaded with you not to, to stay with me instead?" she threw back at him. "I understand the guilt, believe me," she added softly. "There've been times in the last thirty-six hours when I want to beg you not to go, to make you tell the UN and every other busybody involved in this thing to get lost and sort out their problem some other way... but Dr Klein convinced me that there *is* no other way. And I know that if I was selfish and used your love for me to make you stay, I couldn't live with the guilt. I *know* you're torn - I am too!"

He gazed down at her in silence for a few moments before replying. "Yeah, that's just exactly how I feel, Lois. I want to scoop you up, and Beth and David, and fly us all somewhere we'll be safe, and just let the rest of the world fend for themselves... but even if I could protect us when this thing impacts, I couldn't stop hating myself for putting my needs over the rest of the world's. And what sort of life would that be, even if we survived?" His voice was husky, deeply emotional, the tears he wouldn't allow himself to cry choking in his throat.

Lois pulled his head down to her shoulder, cradling him in her arms; she realised suddenly that this was a reversal of roles. In the time since he'd told her about the meteor he had been the one to comfort her, to hold her when she cried tears of grief and pain for her impending loss. She had barely thought about Clark's pain; she had been far too focused on how this thing would affect her and the children. Silently cursing her selfishness, she stroked her husband's



hair as she tried to work out what must be going through his mind. He had mentioned his feelings about missing out on his children's growing up, and it was very clear that this was something which he felt very strongly about. He was quite right: her own father's example wasn't one either of them had wanted to replicate with their own children, and when she'd been pregnant with Beth they had had many earnest conversations about the extent to which he'd have to go and be Superman. He had cut back on his rescue work quite substantially around that time, and although it had picked up again a little since then, there were still incidents he ignored which, a few years ago, he would have helped with.

"Clark... I've been very self-centred," she murmured contritely at last. "I've been completely ignoring how you feel in all this. I've just focused on how it'll affect me and the children...."

"Lois - of course you have!" he replied instantly, raising his head again and staring at her. "It's going to have a pretty major impact on you! And you have to consider that, and tell me what you need me to do in the next week or so, while I'm still here."

She shrugged helplessly. "I know we need to be practical, Clark, and I know you're trying to sort out as many things as possible to make it easier for me. But... you have to talk about how *\*you\** feel about this! You haven't yet... and I need to know."

He was silent for a few moments after that, and as she gazed at him in loving concern, she saw that he wasn't looking at her. His eyes, part-obscured as usual by the glasses he didn't need, were focused somewhere in the distance, his thoughts clearly very far from the present. After a while he turned back to her, then dropped his arms from around her so that he could remove his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose in a gesture which she had long ago decided was pure nervous habit: there was no possible way that the frames of his glasses could actually pinch.

"When they first told me about the meteor, and that I was the only one who could stop it, I was... angry," he told her, his voice a curious monotone. "I thought - well, I guess you can imagine. I know you can - you said it yourself the other evening. I'll do what I can to help anyone who needs it, the world knows that. But when it comes to asking me to take crazy risks when conventional solutions, even if they're slower, are available... well, I was feeling used, and I was prepared to tell them so and then walk out."

"Then the chief scientific officer told me that there were no other options, and when he showed me the simulations... well, I was convinced. But, you know, all I could think about at that point was you... and how I was going to tell you I was going to have to fly into space again. I knew you wouldn't like it." His mouth twitched in a humourless half-smile. "In fact, I knew you'd be furious, all ready to take up the cudgels on my behalf, and I was already working out what I could do to convince you."

Lois bit her lip as she listened to Clark's quiet account; it was so typical of her husband that even when he was being faced with such a nightmarish task his main concern would be for her.

"Then...." He hesitated briefly, his jaw twitching, before continuing. "Then they told me they were sure it was Krypton. The

co-ordinates matched the information they had from me and from the New Kryptonians about where Krypton had been, and from their studies the density and structure looked right. That... that about poleaxed me, Lois. Up till then, I'd been thinking about how fast I'd need to fly to make sure I could get there and back before I ran out of breath, and how I could hit the meteor to make sure I didn't make the same mistakes as I did with Nightfall the first time. But when I realised it was Krypton... yeah, it sank in pretty quick that I wouldn't be returning. And that they knew it too."

The bleakness in his expression shocked Lois to the core; somehow, ever since Clark had told her about this, she had assumed that he had in some way resigned himself to what he had to do, and that it was only she who was angry, wanting to find a way - any way - to avoid the inevitable. But it was now clear that Clark was equally despairing, seething inside with a quiet frustration. He didn't want to die any more than she wanted him to - and from what he'd said a few minutes ago, he'd spent a lot of time over the past couple of days dwelling on everything he would be missing out on.

He inhaled deeply again. "Lois - you know I have to do this. \*I\* know I have to - there really is no choice. I guess... it must be the Kryptonian side of me which won't allow me to do anything other than what's right," he said in a tone of voice which seemed to Lois to be almost apologetic. Did he still think he had to explain why he'd made the decision to go?

Lois shook him lightly, unwilling to allow that statement to stand. "Clark - you know that's not true! The Kryptonian in you, if he was anything like Ching or the others, would be telling you to leave this planet and its people to their own fate, that it's not your problem, that you should just save yourself! But you've never thought like that," she reminded him firmly, in a voice which shook despite her best efforts. "And that's what I love the most about you - that you're so caring, so unselfish... and that's all Clark Kent. That's the part of you which has more humanity than anyone who actually is from this planet!" She reached up and stroked his face again; he leaned into the caress, turning his head to kiss her hands.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," he whispered, his eyes contrite.

"Don't be," she told him softly. "You needed to let off steam, and I'd rather you did it with me - I love you, and I know you didn't really think I.... Clark, let's do what you said, let's go away for the time we have left," she urged him quickly. That would be the best thing, she thought, the best way to make the most of the thirteen days they had left together.

As she watched him regain his composure, she remembered another occasion on which she had thought she'd lost him, when his Super-powers had been needed to save the life of their good friend Jimmy. That hour or so waiting for him to return from STAR Lab had been the worst of her life since he'd got rid of the New Kryptonians. She had really thought he might have sacrificed his life for Shenk and Jimmy. Then he had asked her to meet him at this house; the sight of him sitting in the window embrasure had almost made her heart stop. He'd looked strangely... mystical somehow; it had only been an optical illusion, but the way the sun had poured in through the window and over his shoulders had almost made his body transparent.

For a second she had almost believed she was looking at a ghost. But then he'd smiled at her, and she'd known he was real.

He'd told her then, when she'd ached for him over the years he had lost, that it wasn't the years that mattered, it was the moments, every one, as they happened. But they'd both thought they'd have many years of 'moments' yet. Now, knowing that they had less than two weeks together, each moment of those days was especially precious.

Now, he was smiling down at her, a tender, loving, appreciative expression. "Okay - I'll call Pete and organise the cabin, you go and start packing the kids' things."

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They went first thing the following morning, after Clark had flown to Smallville to bring his parents to Metropolis; Jonathan had persuaded Wayne Irig to look after the farm for a couple of weeks, longer if Lois needed them, he had assured Clark. The children were delighted and excited to have an unexpected holiday from school and were full of plans for things to do once they got there; their chatter in the car helped to lighten the mood, since all four adults were finding it difficult to relax.

As soon as they'd arrived the kids wanted to go exploring; Lois touched Clark's arm gently. "Go. Spend some time with them."

He frowned at her. "But don't you...?"

"I have things I want to do here. Besides, they deserve these memories," she whispered back. He gripped her hand tightly, swallowing visibly, before running after his son and daughter.

"Hey, wait for me!" he called after them; no-one who didn't know him as well as she did would realise that his laugh was forced, Lois thought as she watched the tall man and the two young children, so like their father in appearance and behaviour.

Martha touched Lois's arm lightly. "Are you okay, honey?"

"He's such a terrific dad, Martha!" Lois exclaimed softly, tears in her eyes. "It's just so unfair... Why? Why did this have to happen?"

"No-one knows why these things happen, Lois," Jonathan's gentle voice replied. "All we know is that we have to deal with them, and you and Clark are doing just fine."

"Come on, let's get unpacked," Martha urged, leading Lois inside.

Shouts and laughter a couple of hours later heralded the return of the rest of the Kent family; Lois gazed out the window and saw Clark approaching with David riding on his shoulders while Beth clung to his free hand. Beth's long dark hair, so like Lois's in colour, bounced in the breeze as she ran, her face turned up to gaze at her father. She worships Clark, Lois mused, realising once again just how devastating his disappearance from their lives would be for her

children.

Turning away from the window, she went back into the large sitting room and pretended an interest she didn't feel in that day's Planet.

In bed that night, Lois clung to Clark and made love to him frantically, refusing to allow him to sleep until they were both exhausted and the dawn rays were already beginning to creep through the curtains. They didn't speak apart from murmurs of 'I love you,' and when they did finally sleep she lay pressed up against him, clutching his body tightly, desperately, to her.

This man had invaded her heart, taught her how to love when she'd believed that there was no such emotion in the world. How could she bear to let him go?

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"Mom, can you and Dad look after the kids for a couple of hours? Lois and I have something we need to do," Clark asked over a late breakfast the next morning.

"Of course, honey," Martha agreed warmly. "Are you going somewhere nice?"

Clark raised an eyebrow ironically. "STAR Labs. We need to see Bernie Klein - I called him last night and he's expecting us."

The two elder Kents nodded in understanding; Clark had already told them of his desire to be honest with the scientist who had become his friend.

"Can't we come with you, Daddy?" Beth demanded.

"I'm afraid not, sweetie," Lois quickly replied. "This is just something Daddy and I need to do - we'll be back as soon as we can."

"You taking the Jeep?" Jonathan asked quietly.

Clark shook his head. "We'll leave it in case you and Mom want to use it - I'll take us in." He needed to wear the Suit in any case, he reflected, so Superman might as well fly Lois back to the city.

Lois touched Clark's arm as he was about to scoop her up a little later. "Are you nervous about this, honey?"

He grimaced. "I guess it's going to be another difficult conversation. It was tough enough telling Perry and Jimmy, knowing I was also telling them I'd be...." He trailed off, unwilling to use the words which would remind them both of his impending fate. "Come on, let's go."

He landed, unseen, behind STAR Labs a short time later, quickly spinning back into his own clothes once Lois had slid to the ground. They were both dressed casually today, but he didn't expect that Dr Klein would worry about that. Swiftly he led Lois around the site of the building and then up the entrance steps, informing the

receptionist that they had an appointment.

As they approached Dr Klein's lab, Lois suddenly took his right hand in both of hers, in a grip which he sensed was intended as supportive; a picture flashed into his mind of another occasion when she'd held his hand in exactly that way. They had been going to meet Zara and Ching, to tell them that Clark would go with them to New Krypton to help defeat Lord Nor; they had decided to go together, to reinforce to the New Kryptonians that they made decisions as a couple. Was this decision more painful than that one for her? he wondered. She'd told him that then she'd held onto some faint hope that he would return; this time they both knew that wasn't an option. He gripped her hand tightly in return.

The scientist hurried to meet them as soon as they entered the lab; he was alone, and he immediately locked the door before turning to them.

"Lois, Clark, I'm so glad you're here!" he exclaimed. "I need you to get in touch with Superman for me - I still can't believe that after all these years I don't know how to contact him! Ask him to come and see me, please. I don't know why he hasn't come himself...."

"Dr Klein," Clark interrupted. "It's about Superman we want to talk to you - "

"And ask him to bring a spare Suit, please," the scientist continued, not waiting for Clark to speak.

"Why do you want one of Superman's suits?" Lois asked in surprise, pre-empting Clark who, although he had also been puzzled at the request, really wanted to get on to the reason for their visit.

Bernie's reply took him very much by surprise, though. "I want to see whether I can make any modifications to it," he explained, darting over to one of the lab counters and poring over a chart. "He told me that when he went to destroy the Nightfall asteroid the oxygen tank.... well, I think I can find a way to secure it to his outfit which won't impede his flight or increase the wind resistance, and it should stay with him."

Clark heard Lois gasp. "Dr Klein - you mean Superman could do this and survive?" Her voice was full of sudden hope, and as he turned to look at her he saw her hand held to her throat, her expression tense.

But Klein shook his head, a response Clark had expected. "Lois, there's still the Kryptonite, and in such a concentrated form...." He swallowed visibly, then turned to look at Clark. "You'll never know how much I wish I'd never told the UN Superman would be able to destroy this thing. If I'd only been a little bit more cautious in my estimates... maybe they wouldn't have asked him. Or maybe he'd have refused to go if he'd thought he wasn't likely to succeed...."

Clark could only watch, helpless, as the doctor paced about the laboratory, clearly agitated. He made several attempts to interrupt, but Bernard Klein wasn't listening.

"Lois, Clark, I've been Superman's doctor for seven years now, and I consider him to be my friend - and now I feel like I've betrayed him!"

Clark stepped forward and laid his hand heavily on the scientist's shoulder from behind. "You haven't betrayed me, Bernie. And I do consider you a friend - a very good and true friend." In his need to console his friend and doctor, he momentarily forgot that he wasn't in the Suit and spoke in Superman's voice; Klein stopped abruptly and swung around, confused, clearly looking for someone.

"Clark... I thought I heard Superman!"

"You did," Clark explained quietly, thinking that this was the easiest way to do it. "Bernie...." He increased the pressure on Klein's shoulder, then added softly, "You've been a good friend to me for a long time, and you're the only real friend Superman has. That's why I'm surprised you haven't already guessed."

"Guessed what?" Klein was wild-eyed, confused and almost at a loss for words as he stared at Clark.

"About Superman - about me," Clark answered. Slowly he removed his glasses, brushing back his hair with his other hand and then standing straight and tall in front of the doctor.

"Oh my lord... it's you!" Bernie clutched at the counter behind him for support then, finding that it wasn't enough, he took a couple of steps backwards until he was leaning against it.

"Yes, I'm Superman," Clark clarified. "And I'm sorry I haven't been to see you in the last couple of days - I've just had a lot to do."

"You're married... you have kids!" Bernie exclaimed in horror. "You can't do this, Superman! You have to tell EPRAD and the UN that you can't go."

"He has to go, Bernie," Lois interjected quietly. "I hate the idea too, of course I do, but he has no choice. \*We\* have no choice."

"Oh, this all makes so much sense now!" Klein muttered. "All those times when I wondered... the way you and Lois were always the only people who could get hold of Superman, why Clark never seemed to mind Lois being so close to.... Oh lord! Cl - Superman...."

"It's Clark, please, Bernie," Clark replied gently. "And I'm sorry I had to keep this secret from you for so long. You'll understand that this is a pretty big secret, and up until this meteor, the only people who knew were my parents and Lois."

"Oh, I'll never tell anyone," the scientist quickly assured him. "I may seem absent-minded, but I know how to keep a secret."

"We don't doubt it," Lois replied quickly. "And I think even if this hadn't happened we'd have told you the truth sometime soon. The children," she explained at his curious look. "They're half-Kryptonian, and you're the only expert on Kryptonian physiology around... we thought we'd probably need your help in a year or two."

"Possibly sooner than that, honey," Clark interjected, realising that he hadn't told Lois the latest news. "Yesterday Beth took a tumble when we were out in the woods. I checked her over and she seemed fine - she was barely hurt, and there was no damage that I could see. This morning she doesn't even have a bruise, and I'm pretty sure any normal kid would."

"Her invulnerability's beginning to kick in," Klein mused excitedly. "How old is she?"

"Five," Lois answered automatically. "Clark, you didn't mention - "

"I'm sorry," he told her quickly. "I meant to." Turning back to Bernie, he continued, "So will you take care of Beth and David for me? I need to know there's someone I can trust keeping an eye on them."

"Clark, of course I will!" came the instant reply. "I just wish there was any other way...."

He didn't want to hear it; he'd been hearing the same words over and over from his parents, Lois, and a couple of days ago Jimmy and Perry. It didn't help at all, and he was getting heartily sick of sympathy when there was absolutely nothing which could be done. Interrupting the scientist, he said quickly, "I know. Bernie, I want you to know that we didn't just tell you the truth today because of the kids. I meant it when I said that you've been the only real friend Superman's had here, and I wanted you to know who I am." He inhaled deeply, glancing at Lois and taking in the fact that she was looking equally uncomfortable with the heightened emotions.

Before he could speak, however, he noticed that Bernie's expression had changed. The scientist now looked agitated, as if some new thought had occurred to him. "Bernie?"

"Clark, I... oh, I'm not sure I should be telling you this, but you call me a friend, and I can't \*not\* say anything...." he whispered, looking both guilty and ashamed.

"Telling us what?" Lois demanded swiftly before Clark could respond.

"Well... Lois, you have to promise that you won't tell anyone I told you this!" Bernie demanded, a hunted expression on his face.

"Bernie, you know you can trust us," Clark said reassuringly. "What's the problem?"

"It's not a problem exactly, just.... Clark, Lois has probably told you that when she came to talk to me about this before we discussed whether there was any way you could be protected against the Kryptonite. I couldn't think of anything, I don't think there's anything which would work... but when I was out at EPRAD a couple of days ago I overheard a conversation...."

"You mean there \*is\* a way Clark could survive this - and no-one's

telling us?" Lois demanded furiously. "What the... who do these people think - "

"Lois." Clark placed his hand on her arm, trying to calm her; he could see that her response - however justified it might be - was not encouraging the scientist to finish his explanation.

"No, I don't think they know of anything," Bernie answered Lois's question. "It was their attitude which really upset me.... It seems the President had been asking whether there was any way something could be designed which would shield Superman from the effects of the Kryptonite. But the Pentagon feels that any form of protection, unless guaranteed 100% effective, will merely encumber Superman and perhaps lead to a false sense of confidence which will lead to failure...." He trailed off, looking distinctly awkward.

Clark inhaled sharply at this, and glanced at Lois to see that she was equally incandescent. "They really think I'd let myself get complacent about something as important as this?" he demanded incredulously.

"How *\*dare\** they?!" Lois expostulated, her voice coldly, furiously angry. "That does it, Clark, you're not going to do it. If those... *\*bastards\** in the military can take that kind of callous attitude to your safety, your *\*life,\** then you don't owe them any consideration at all! So you can just fly over there right now and tell them what they can do with their mission - "

"Lois...." Clark's voice held that familiar calming note, and he quickly moved to her side to wrap his arms securely around her. He understood exactly how she felt - damn it, he wasn't overjoyed at this information himself. It was yet more evidence of what he had suspected for some time: that the military simply regarded him as a useful, but ultimately expendable, item of emergency equipment. A *\*thing,\** not a person. And he was once again amazed at how much the knowledge hurt. All he had ever tried to do, since discovering his powers, was to use them for the benefit of others. He was still willing to do that, even at the sacrifice of his life. He'd made that clear to the people he'd met with to discuss the meteor. He had told them that he understood that what they were asking him to do would cost him his life, and that given the greater need of the planet, he was willing to make that sacrifice.

The least he could have expected was some honesty and consideration in return, he felt now, his thoughts turning bitter as he cradled Lois against him. Again, the thought flitted through his mind that he should find somewhere safe - dig a deep crater somewhere, and take his family and closest friends with him, where he could try to protect them from the impact of the explosion and then bring them to safety when it was all over.

But as quickly as he considered it, he dismissed it. Even if it were possible - which he doubted - he just couldn't do it.

"Lois, I can't let everyone die just because a couple of idiots at the Pentagon have lost all sense of reality," he told her wryly.

She was still in his arms for a moment, taking in his words. Then she pulled back, gazing up to meet his eyes. "No, I guess you can't," she



said heavily. "But I want people to know how these guys think.... Clark, I'm going to write this story, after.... And when I do, I'm going to let the public know just how the military thanked Superman for his sacrifice."

Out of the corner of his eye, Clark saw Bernie shuffle uncomfortably, and he remembered the scientist's original request. "Bernie - Lois won't write anything if you don't want her to," he assured his friend. "Honey, I understand how you feel, but we can't get Bernie into trouble over this."

Lois's eyes flashed, but she seemed to accept his decision. Clark had had enough by now, however, so he turned back to Dr Klein.

"We have to get going, Bernie, but I'll come back later with that Suit you wanted." At that, he turned to Lois, extending his hand to her. "Come on, honey, we need to get back."

As the door to the lab closed behind them Clark glanced back, to see Bernie Klein crouched over his workbench, his head in his hands and his shoulders shaking. One person who would miss Superman, not for what he could do, but for who he was, Clark reflected sadly, as he swiftly pulled the door shut behind them.

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"Clark - you can't just let this drop!" Lois insisted once they were airborne again. "You know it's not the first time the military's shown they couldn't care less about you. They would have killed you when you were working with them to free the world from those renegade New Kryptonians, and when the red Kryptonite made your powers go crazy they were all set to shoot you with a green Kryptonite bullet!" Her voice shook as she spoke, from anger and appalled disbelief.

"I know," he agreed quietly.

"You know? What sort of an answer is that?" Reaction was now setting in for Lois, and to her surprise she started shaking involuntarily. Clark obviously noticed, for he focused his attention on the ground and a few moments later began to drift downwards. Once he'd landed in a deserted area of the mountains, he held Lois at arm's length and used his heat vision to warm her up.

"I *do* know how you feel, honey," he repeated quietly, though cold, disbelieving anger was visible in his brown eyes. "And I agree with you. I don't trust the military chiefs either - they see me as a convenience, no more. And they wouldn't hesitate to dispose of me once I stopped being a convenience - that's why I'll always be grateful that we found Bernie Klein and that he became the expert on Superman. We can trust him, he's proven that a number of times. He won't just blindly go along with whatever the Pentagon wants."

Yes, they had been extremely fortunate with Bernie, Lois agreed. But how could they ignore the fact that the military wasn't even interested in the possibility that there might be some way to help Superman get out of this alive? She had so far accepted the word of everyone concerned that there had been no way for him to survive. But if the government wasn't even *trying* to find a way, in case it made Superman complacent.... Her lip curled at the word. Who knew? - perhaps if the government had insisted, told the Pentagon where to

get off, someone might have found a way.

But no - it wasn't even on the agenda, let alone a priority.

"Clark... you can't let them treat you like that!" she protested.

He shrugged helplessly, his fists now clenched by his sides. "What can I do, honey? You know I have to do this anyway. And regardless of whether the military, or the government, care whether there's a way out for me or not, I trust Bernie when he tells me there isn't. I know he's considered all sorts of options, and he's got the existing research we did on how lead affects my powers and how it shields me from Kryptonite. No-one understands my powers better than Bernie."

"And you want me to protect him," Lois added softly. "You want me to promise not to reveal what he told me, in case the source is traced back to him and someone takes retaliatory action?"

"That's about it," Clark agreed. "Look, Lois, I'm all in favour of you exposing the military's attitude. But use what you've already got, and do some investigating of your own. I know you can - I have enormous faith in your abilities, honey. Just keep Bernie out of it."

Lois nodded. She would write that story, and it would be the best piece she had ever written. This was too important to be ignored; it was essential that the world not only got to know that Superman had sacrificed himself in the cause of saving the planet, but also that even in the act of making that sacrifice, the military chiefs who had asked him to do it, as always, made it clear just how expendable they'd viewed Superman. And the more heads which had to roll as a result, the better.

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Over the next few days at the cabin the strain was visibly increasing for the four adults. They tried to keep it hidden from the children, but it was very difficult; Lois was extremely grateful for Martha's ability to maintain a calm exterior and for Jonathan's quiet, solid strength. Only after the children had gone to bed did they allow their real feelings to show; sometimes then Clark would mutter that he needed to do a patrol and would disappear for up to an hour. Lois tried not to be hurt about these disappearances; she knew that he was hurting inside, and also trying to cope with his family's increasing despair. He needed time to himself, a means of working off some of the frustration, and if going flying or whatever he did when he went out helped him to do that, she was glad. She knew that he was still trying to come to terms with what Bernie Klein had told them about the military's attitude to his life; although he hadn't mentioned it since and he'd insisted that they weren't to tell his parents, she knew it was still very much on his mind.

His night-time patrols probably helped him to sleep, as well; she was aware that for the first few nights after his visit to the UN Clark had barely been able to sleep at all, and on at least a couple of occasions he had gone out as Superman when there hadn't really been any need, just to keep himself occupied. He wasn't aware that she

knew about this: she'd pretended to be asleep both when he'd left and on his return - he had enough on his mind without worrying about her sleepless nights as well. Or her nightmares, she thought bleakly. On a couple of occasions she'd had nightmares about this situation, either seeing herself at her husband's funeral or herself finding Clark's battered and burned body. Thankfully, as far as Lois was concerned, Clark hadn't been there either time when she'd woken up, panting and desolate, after the nightmare.

She knew that there were things they needed to discuss, but neither she nor Clark seemed able to raise the subject. She was aware that Clark had been discreetly ensuring that their finances were in order - nothing too obvious, probably because he didn't want anyone in officialdom to suspect suicide when Clark Kent disappeared. But before they had left for the cabin he had spent some time in their study and when she'd joined him after a while, all their records and documents were tidied and labelled in files, all the bills sorted and the home accounts package they used brought up to date. She had glanced at him, eyebrows raised, but he had simply given an embarrassed laugh, remarking that she'd always called him an obsessive - he was only reverting to type.

< Why can't we discuss this stuff?> she wondered now. Because it wasn't a situation either of them had ever envisaged, planning for the expected death of one of them. And maybe because Clark was finding some solace in the little tasks which would assure him that his family would be materially secure after his death. He had always had a strong need to protect those around him, a need which, Lois was sure, sprang not only from his Kryptonian-inherited Super-powers, but also from the very human person Clark Kent was. The old-fashioned country boy, son of farmers, would instinctively want to look after those he loved.

And instead, he had tried to focus their private discussions on the good times, reminiscing over their shared past, laughing together over mistakes they had both made in their long path to becoming a couple. In retrospect, some of their past decisions or actions had been laughable, such as her description, in the very early days of their acquaintance, of Clark as the 'before' and Superman as the 'way, way after.' They were also able to laugh over Clark's jealousy of Dan Scardino and hers of Mayson Drake; it had been their own insecurities in each case which had done more to keep them apart rather than the intervention of any other person.

Talking about the good times helped; and Lois was certain that, for Clark, it was serving to help him take his mind off what was to come and to reinforce his sense of the bond between them. But there were other things they really needed to discuss, she mused, and she needed to get Clark to talk to her, \*really\* talk to her, very soon. After all, by his timetable there was a week left.

Only a week in which to accumulate her final memories of Clark, memories which would have to last her a lifetime....

"Lois? Lois, are you okay?" Martha's concerned voice impinged on Lois's consciousness.

< Sure I'm okay - why wouldn't I be? My husband's going to...> Breaking off that thought before she became bitter, Lois forced a smile to her face and faced Martha. "Sorry - I was just thinking."

"Does it bother you that Clark's been disappearing like this?" her mother-in-law asked, concerned.

But this time Lois was able to answer truthfully. "No. I think he needs some time on his own - I guess this is getting pretty oppressive for him." Lois was sure of it, in fact; she'd caught sight of Clark's expression shortly before he'd disappeared that evening. He'd looked... hunted. As if he needed to hide. She knew that he had a lot on his mind - well, why wouldn't he? After all, he was about to embark on a suicide mission in a mere few days' time! But she was pretty sure that there were some specific things on his mind which he wasn't discussing with her. Was he scared of dying? Afraid that he wouldn't manage to destroy the meteor? Or was it anguish at having to abandon his family, as her very loyal husband would see it?

"And it isn't for you, honey?" Martha was incredulous. "Sometimes I could just box his ears...."

"No, Martha." Lois crossed to the other woman's side, taking her arm. "Really - this is far worse for him than it is for us! And he's trying so hard to comfort \*us,\* to pretend that he's okay, having a good time. But you look into his eyes sometimes - especially when the kids aren't around. You'll see his pain... it makes me want to cry, except I've already cried more than I ever thought I could in my whole life." Watching her mother-in-law's expression then, Lois saw recognition in Martha's face that her reaction had been unfair. But Lois didn't comment; she understood only too well how the strain was making all of them think things, even say things, which they knew were not reasonable. She squeezed Martha's arm briefly, reassuringly.

"Lois, have you decided on the story for public consumption to explain Clark's disappearance?" Jonathan asked as he carried a tray of coffee into the sitting-room.

Lois shrugged. "He's just said he'll stage some sort of accident - he didn't say what, but he'll make it something where the chances of a body being found are unlikely."

"But how will that help?" Jonathan asked, puzzled. "You don't want to wait five years to have him declared dead - I mean, I don't know what your finances are like, and we'll help all we can, but you can't claim on his pension or insurance until he's declared dead."

"Won't be too much of a problem, depending what Clark does," Lois said with a forced grimace. "We did a story on that a few months ago. If there are witnesses to the accident, or there's proof that the missing person was in the situation and there's no way any body's likely to be recovered - say if a guy goes out on his own in a fishing boat and there's a storm and the boat capsizes, then the relatives can petition a court to issue a death certificate without a body." She shrugged. "It's not exactly something I want to do, but it's what has to be done."

"And what will you tell David and Beth?" Martha asked softly.

Lois sank into a chair, the lines of strain now clearly visible on her face. "God, Martha, that's the hardest part! I just don't

know.... David's too young to understand that his daddy's dead; all he'll know is that Clark is suddenly not there any more. Beth... she'll understand, sort of - the grandfather of one of her schoolfriends died a few months ago and we had a long talk with her about death. But that doesn't mean it'll be easy....

"And it's so hard to think that Clark's just not going to be there as they grow up!" Lois added, her voice on the edge of breaking. "He was so excited about being a father, and we made so many plans, so many promises to each other about putting the kids first, protecting them - and if Beth really is beginning to inherit some of Clark's powers, he needs to be there to help her with them. Now..." her voice dropped to a whisper, "I'll have to cope on my own."

Lois jumped to her feet again suddenly, whirling around to face her parents-in-law. "And you know what makes me feel the most guilty? The evening Clark came home and told me all this, he was late back and I had to get the kids' dinner, even though it was his turn. And I was irritated, and I found myself thinking how much easier it would be if I was a single parent, then I wouldn't be relying on him - " Her voice failed her entirely as she released a choking sob. "Martha, Jonathan, I feel like I wished him dead!" she exclaimed a moment or two later.

"No, Lois, of course you didn't!" Instantly, both elder Kents' arms were around her, holding her close. Martha stroked Lois's hair, murmuring softly, "Oh, honey, we know you never meant that! You've nothing to feel guilty about, sweetie! Of course you get frustrated sometimes - that's hardly surprising when you never know where he is, or whether he'll be home in time to take care of chores or not. You can't blame yourself for that!"

"Even still, I'm going to be a single parent anyway," Lois replied bleakly. "And if I find it tough, I can only remind myself that it's what I wanted - \*I\* said it'd be easier!"

"Lois, everyone says things they don't mean sometimes," Jonathan pointed out reasonably. "Just because you thought it once or twice - and you know you never meant it - doesn't mean you ever wanted it to come true."

"Noooo... but I still thought it!" Lois protested.

"Lois, that does not mean \*you're\* to blame for what's happened!" Martha insisted firmly. "And you can't waste your time or your energies indulging in a guilt-trip when your children need you to be there for them - and you need to be there for \*yourself\*!" Clearly gauging that Lois needed to be jolted out of her misery, Martha's voice had become crisp, that familiar tone which had told the male members of her household for many years that she expected to be obeyed.

And it had a similar effect on Lois; she straightened, swallowed and nodded. "You're right, Martha. I am being self-indulgent here, aren't I?" She inhaled deeply. "I have to be strong, for everyone here - the children need me, and Clark needs me. He's trying so hard to hold us all together, and he needs me to help him. I can't allow my guilt to get in the way of that."

"Especially when you have nothing to be guilty about in the first

place," Jonathan added.

Perhaps not, Lois mused as she went up to bed shortly afterwards; but she couldn't help feeling that at the very least it was a kind of dark irony that, so soon after reflecting yet again on the difficulties which Clark's extra-curricular activities caused in their lives, she should discover that she was going to lose him permanently.

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Clark circled above the cabin one more time, telling himself that he really should come down and go inside. It wasn't fair to leave Lois like this; she needed to be with him right now, and it was inconsiderate to want to be alone. She, after all, would have the rest of her life to be without him; he owed it to her to spend his time with her while he could.

But he had been finding things very claustrophobic over the past few days. It wasn't Lois's fault, or his parents', he knew; they were all doing their best to act normally, especially in front of David and Beth. But there were times when he caught one of the adults looking at him when they didn't realise he could see them, and their expression was desperately sad. Of *\*course\** they were distressed, he understood that; he would feel exactly the same in their position. But *\*he\** was the one who was going to have to undertake this almost-impossible mission; he was the one who would die, alone and possibly painfully, certainly terrifyingly, somewhere in outer space. And he would carry the unbearable weight of responsibility for the lives of the entire human race on his shoulders when he began his journey, knowing that if he failed to destroy the meteor he would still die and the planet would be annihilated.

While he hardly wanted to keep reminding himself of his fate during these few days he had left to spend with his family, he was forced, of necessity, to think about what had to be done and to plan his strategy. When he had gone to the UN to tell them that he would go, the officers had called in the EPRAD experts again; they had spent a couple of hours with him going over all the technical and scientific information he needed. He had assimilated it all easily enough; now he had to assemble it all together in his mind so that he could work out the flight speed which would be necessary, the angle at which he should hit the meteor so that he could get at it before it robbed him entirely of his powers, where exactly he needed to place the explosives at the same time, how quickly he could bounce back so that he could deflect larger pieces. He could do it, he thought. But it was the consequences, the aftermath, which scared him. He wasn't exactly a stranger to pain these days, and he had been close to death a few times. But this was different; he'd never, so far, had to go into a situation *\*expecting\** his own death as a consequence. And he'd never had to make the choice between his family and all that was precious to him, and the future of the world.

Yes, he was afraid. And resentful, and angry, and bitter... and very, very alone, even though he was in the midst of his family. Even spending time with Lois and their children, he felt as much alone, some of the time, as he would if he was already out in the vast emptiness of space.

Perhaps he should tell Lois what he was feeling, he mused as he

gradually let himself sink to the ground. But he hadn't discussed this with her so far because he knew, he could see, how distressed she was. He had no wish to add to her anguish. On the other hand, they were soul mates. They knew each other so well... she would know he wasn't telling her everything. But did she want to hear this? Perhaps that should be her decision, he told himself soberly before spinning back to his own clothes.

Entering the cabin, he quickly realised that everyone had gone to bed, and he floated up the stairs in order to avoid waking people. He paused outside the children's bedroom, then peered around the door. They were sleeping soundly, but as usual David had thrown off his blankets. Clark floated over to his son's bedside, pulling up the blankets and rearranging them before bending and placing a very soft kiss on David's forehead.

"Daddy?" A sleepy voice came from the other bed.

"Hey, Bethy sweetheart," Clark whispered, allowing himself to float to her bed and crouching down beside her. "You should be asleep."

Her small hand stretched out towards him, touching his cheek. He covered it with his own, pressing it to his lips.

"Daddy, I love you," his daughter murmured sleepily.

"I love you too, darling," Clark said softly, bending to press his lips to her forehead. His hand caressed her long hair briefly as it lay spread over her pillow. "You get back to sleep, okay? It's late."

"G'night, Daddy," she replied, giving a huge yawn suddenly. He smiled at her, his heart turning over again at the thought of leaving this child - these children - whom he loved so much.

Forcing himself to leave the bedroom, he went along the passageway and into the room he and Lois were sharing. She was sitting, fully dressed, on the bed, as if she'd been waiting for him. Hurrying to her side, he took her hands in his and squeezed them apologetically.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry I left you for so long," he said huskily.

But she shook her head. "It's okay, Clark, I understand. You needed some time on your own - I can tell the strain is getting too much for you."

< God, how well she understands me!> he thought incredulously. It was incredible, when he thought about it: he was a Kryptonian, an alien from another planet, in another galaxy, and yet this Earth woman, who had always accepted him for what he was, seemed able to get inside his head and work out what he was thinking, how he was feeling, sometimes even before he knew himself. He loved her so much....

He bent and kissed her, his lips pressing against hers in a silent communication of love and need. She parted her own lips under his, sliding her tongue forward to caress the inside of his mouth, the edge of his teeth in that little way she had which always made the

hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. In a moment or two he would have no control left....

But that wasn't what he'd intended to do right now. Gently easing away from her, he sighed. "Lois, I haven't been talking to you the way I should...."

"You mean because you haven't told me how scared you are of what you have to do, or that you're worried about how we'll manage without you?" she replied with a little smile.

He lowered himself carefully to the bed. "Lois... are you a mind-reader or something?!"

"No - I've just been married to you for over six years, and in love with you for a couple of years before that," she told him wryly. "Honey, I know - or I can take a pretty good guess at - what's going through your mind. And if you want to talk... why don't you take me out for a walk? The kids will be fine with your parents here."

That sounded like a good idea, Clark thought. "Okay, but it's pretty chilly out there. Wrap up, okay?"

She grinned impishly at him. "Actually, I don't mind getting cold when it means you'll use your... special vision gizmo to warm me up!" The smile faded very quickly, and Clark knew why; she'd just reminded herself that she wouldn't have him around for that sort of thing very much longer.

He sighed inwardly and moved swiftly to grab her heavy sweater, waiting while she put it on, then he threw open the large bedroom window. It was a dark night, and he was wearing a black polo shirt and jeans, so he decided not to bother putting on the Suit. The cabin was in a fairly remote area anyway, and he felt confident he wouldn't be seen.

It felt good to take Lois in his arms again in their normal flying position; knowing that they would have few further opportunities made the occasion particularly bitter-sweet. Quickly he flew them further up the mountain to a secluded area by a stream, then, landing, he lowered Lois to the ground and looped his arm around her shoulders before leading her along the rough path by the edge of the stream.

"Tell me about it, Clark," she murmured after a few minutes. "I need to know... you need to talk about it, too."

"Lois, what can I say?" he replied helplessly. "I don't want to do this. You know that -you have to know. But it feels a little like when Ching had those two bombs rigged up - when I had a choice between saving Jimmy and Perry or saving the citizens of Metropolis. Two people or ten million people - what kind of choice was that? Yet those two were people I loved...." He sighed again. "But this time it's different, too. I get to stay with you - but only if I'm prepared to accept billions of people's deaths in a few months' time - including you, and everyone else I love. Though you know that even if there was a way I could save you, and the kids, and Mom and Dad, I'd still do this thing."

"I know you would," she told him; he turned to face her and saw her



eyes shimmering in the dark. "And if I didn't feel... absolutely desolate, as if my own world was coming to an end, at the prospect of losing you, I'd be so proud of you. You are incredibly brave, Clark. And I... I admire you so much for it."

"I don't feel brave right now, Lois," he whispered. "I just feel... scared, and helpless, and alone, and... and so damned angry! Why did this have to happen? We were so happy! Why can't I just be allowed to live a normal life, like any other guy?"

Lois was silent for a few moments, transmitting strength and support to him through her loving touch. Then she laid her head briefly against his shoulder before speaking. "Do you wish you weren't Superman, Clark?"

Again, Clark wondered at this woman's intuition. "Yeah, that thought had crossed my mind a few times, honey," he conceded wryly. His voice lowered, grew husky. "It's not that I wish I'd never invented Superman - I couldn't wish that. There are so many things which wouldn't have happened if I hadn't, and so many people - including you, love - who wouldn't be alive if Superman had never existed. But...." He sighed heavily again, wondering whether she would think he was completely crazy. "I wish I could split myself in two. One of me Clark, the other Superman. That way, Superman could go and do this thing, and I could stay with you."

"Oh, I wish...." Lois's voice was little more than a breathy whisper. "I'd miss Superman, Clark, but at least I'd still have you. And I always meant it when I told you I'd love you without your powers."

"Hey, I know that!" he quickly assured her. "I got over that particular piece of stupidity a long time ago - "

"Clark!" she interrupted him suddenly. "You've given me an idea, and I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner.... Clones!"

Clark recoiled; their previous experiences with cloning had been experiences neither of them wished to remember, and he wondered why she was raising the subject now. But she was speaking again, and he made himself listen.

"Clark - Bernie still has the data from the previous cloning experiments, right? I mean, after the original LexLabs experiment, and the data the police got from Dr Mamba? Yes? Well, why can't he grow a clone of Superman and send the clone to destroy the meteor?"

Lois's expression was so hopeful, so excited, that Clark wanted so badly to hug her and tell her that her idea was brilliant. But he knew otherwise. "Lois, honey, I wish we could! But remember the clones - the Superman one and the one of you? They both looked adult, but they had the maturity of children. Even if Bernie could create one in time, he wouldn't have the understanding or the intelligence to do what's necessary, even if he'd agree to it. Clone technology simply hasn't come far enough along to allow for an adult, intelligent clone yet."

Lois grimaced, and Clark could feel her frustration. Then she turned to glare at him again, although he was aware that her emotions were

not directed at him. "Where the \*hell\* is HG Wells? Why isn't he doing anything to help us? He always came before, like when Tempus sent you into infinity. After all this time... and the things he's said to us about our future...."

"Lois, honey," Clark reasoned quietly, his own emotions torn to shreds and his voice almost hoarse. "You know why he isn't here. He comes to set things right when they've gone wrong according to the pattern of history. This time... Lois, I've thought about this a lot. I thought about it the day I was asked to do this. HG Wells isn't here because this is supposed to happen. I am supposed to go and destroy that meteor, and I am supposed to die in doing it. And our children will grow up and carry on the Krypto-human line."

"No, Clark!" Lois cried out suddenly. "I will \*not\* accept that you are meant to do this, that there's anything... \*predestined\* about it! We were meant to be together!"

"Yes, we were, honey," he agreed. "But the important thing, as far as the future is concerned, is that we have our children. It's obvious that I'm supposed to do this. And you know what HG always said about changes in the time-line: that they cause ripples through the course of history... or the future, in our case. Who knows? If I don't do this, quite apart from the impact of the meteor - " he grimaced, "something else could happen, or not happen, which could have a devastating effect on our futures."

"Whose futures?" Lois threw back at him bitterly. "Not yours!" She walked on for a few paces, her free arm swinging in a manner which showed her anger and frustration. Sighing then, she turned to face him again. "I wish you weren't so rational about this sometimes - you sound like HG Wells yourself when you talk about changes in the timeline as a result of not doing something...."

In an attempt to lighten the mood, Clark raised his eyebrows and drawled, "Lois, I'm Kryptonian! Being rational and unemotional is completely in character for me, or at least so I'm told...."

"Clark, most of the time you're one of the most deeply emotional people I know," she reminded him softly. "And you know it's one of the things I love most about you."

"And one of the things \*I\* love most about \*you\* is the way you fight for me, defend me, the way you want to attack anyone who wants to do me harm," he confessed huskily. "Of course, that trait of yours has to compete with at least six thousand other little things about you I absolutely adore... I just love you, so much, more than I could ever find words to express."

She stopped and threw her arms around him, pressing herself against his body. "Oh, Clark... you just say the most beautiful things sometimes! Oh, God... how am I going to live without you?"

The pain and despair in her voice was nearly his own undoing, but he forced his emotions back and gripped her shoulders firmly. "Lois, my love, you will cope. You will carry on, for the sake of David and Beth and because I want you to. I \*need\* you to. I've always admired your strength and determination to succeed, Lois. You always applied them to your career, and you were - are - brilliant. Now I want you

to apply those traits to our family. You'll do that for me?"

She gazed up at him, her eyes bright with the tears which rarely seemed to be far away at the moment. After a moment, she nodded. "I promise, Clark."

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Clark slowly awakened the following morning with the sense that something was wrong. Instinctively he reached out for Lois, but she wasn't lying beside him. In fact, she wasn't even in the bedroom.

In a sudden panic, he jumped out of bed and almost spun into his Suit to go and search for her, but then he forced himself to think rationally. Where would she have gone? He would have heard the Jeep leave if she'd taken that, and the only other alternative was that she'd gone for a walk. He supposed he couldn't really blame her if she'd slipped out alone; he'd done it several times himself. He couldn't be so selfish as to assume that he was the only one feeling any strain.

But then his Super-hearing caught a sound from downstairs, and he X-rayed through the floor. Lois was in the living-room, dressed haphazardly in jeans and an old shirt of his, pacing up and down with a cup of coffee in her hand - a cup of coffee in imminent danger of spilling all over the floor, he noticed in wry amusement.

Two seconds later, and dressed in T-shirt and jeans, he floated over to her and gently took the cup from her. "You okay, honey?"

"Clark!" She swung around, startled. He took in her expression: the dark circles around her eyes, the pale face, and something else.... Not the distress of impending grief, he realised in surprise, but dogged, hard determination.

"What's up, Lois?" he asked her softly.

"Clark, what are we *\*doing\** here?" she demanded, throwing out her arm to indicate the cabin.

"You know what we're doing here, honey," he reminded her quietly, a hard edge to his voice.

"No, why the hell are we being so defeatist, Clark? I've never been defeatist in my life - so what have I been doing just sitting around here waiting for you to go and die?!"

"Because there isn't anything else we can do other than make the most of these last few days? Spend some time together and with the kids?" he pointed out, a little annoyed that she seemed to be accusing him of defeatism. Did she think he hadn't spent hours upon hours trying to come up with alternatives? Did she think he *\*wanted\** to leave her? Didn't she understand the hell he'd been going through for the past week?

"Clark, there has to be something. There has to be!" she flung at him agitatedly. "And I can't sit around here any longer - I'm going back to the city and I'm going to figure something out. I'll talk to

whoever I need to - I'll go straight to the President and the Secretary-General of the UN if I have to!"

He could understand her frustration; of course he could. But he thought she'd come to understand that there really was no alternative to the course of action he had determined upon. He had explained it to her. Dr Klein had explained it to her. Clark stepped away from his wife and exhaled long and hard, trying to construct a reply which wouldn't reveal the anger he was currently trying to suppress; although he felt that she should understand that her attitude wasn't helping him, the last thing he wanted to do right now was have an argument.

"Lois. Lois, I understand how you feel. Really, I do. But you must know that if there was any other way out of this I would have found it. I'm not running down your abilities - you're brilliant, I told you that last night. I've always thought that. But this is something I know about, and I know that I'm the only chance this planet has of survival. So unless you can find another Superman from somewhere...." He trailed off, giving her a rueful half-smile as he did.

"Another Superman...." she replied thoughtfully, and Clark was reminded of her clone suggestion the previous night. But she continued wistfully, "This is where we really need a way to get to one of these alternate universes, or to the future of this one."

Clark just stared at her. "Honey, you can't possibly be saying you'd ask someone else - the alternate universe's me, or one of our descendants - to do this for us?" His voice was incredulous. Even if it was possible, he could never imagine asking someone else, a Superman from another universe, to give up his life so that \*he\* could go on living. Even if the other Clark came and offered willingly, he would refuse. He couldn't carry on living knowing that he had allowed another man, another version of himself to sacrifice his life instead.

But Lois came to slide herself into his arms. "No, I guess not," she answered quietly, in a defeated tone. "I just... I can't stand doing nothing!"

"I know, honey, I know," he soothed, holding her tightly against him. She relaxed into his arms, and he rested his head on top of hers, staring abstractedly into the distance, deep in thought.

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A little later, Lois went upstairs to see to the children; Clark had heard them stirring and had announced his intention of going to wash and dress them, but she'd felt the need for something to occupy herself - and, though she would never have told Clark, the need for a little space. Anyway, Beth had been behaving rather badly over the past day or two, refusing to do things when she was asked, not replying when she was spoken to, and Lois preferred not to expose Clark to her daughter's fits of temper. It was very unlike Beth, and Lois had tried on a couple of occasions to talk to the child, to find out whether there was something wrong, but every time she attempted to open a discussion, Beth turned stubbornly away.

She had finally accepted Clark's weary insistence that there was no alternative to the course of action he'd decided upon, and she had recognised from his tone of voice that he was every bit as angry at his forthcoming fate as she was. So, since they couldn't change what had to happen, why couldn't they just put it out of their minds for the next few days? But the knowledge was always there, at the forefront of her mind; every time she looked at Clark she was reminded that very soon she would have a lifetime to spend without him. It was making both of them tense, brittle, and she hated it.

So he was now preparing breakfast, and she pinned a smile on her face as she went into Beth and David's bedroom to get them ready for their baths. Several games later, with her clothes soaking wet, she felt a little more able to face the remainder of the day. But as she turned to Beth, David having already run out to find his grandparents, she found that her daughter had refused point-blank to put her clothes on. When Lois questioned her daughter's refusal, Beth simply screwed up her face and pronounced the T-shirt and jeans 'yucky.'

< Oh, not today....> Lois groaned. "Beth, sweetie, what's got into you lately? You don't normally act like this. Please, sweetie, talk to me."

Beth turned away.

"Beth, I don't know what's upset you, but if you tell me, I promise I won't be angry with you - and Daddy won't either. We love you very much and we just want you to be happy. If we've done something which has made you angry, then tell me so we can say sorry."

There was silence for a few long seconds, then Beth turned back to face Lois, thumb in her mouth. "Why is everyone upset all the time? Are you angry with me?"

"With \*you\*? Oh, of course not, honey, what made you think that?" Lois asked in amazement. What had Beth been thinking - why had she jumped to that conclusion? And why was she suddenly sucking her thumb, when she'd grown out of that habit when she'd been younger than David?

But Beth shook her head. "Everyone's so sad, and I don't understand why. Grandma and Granddad are always talking quietly and then they look at us and stop talking, but they look worried. Why would they be worried? Are they mad at me?"

Helplessly, Lois drew her daughter into her arms and cuddled her. "No, no-one's mad at you, honey, I promise."

But Beth hadn't finished. "And Daddy keeps hugging us - I mean, I love him hugging and cuddling me, but he hugs so tightly and yesterday I had to tell him he was hurting me. And you look sad too. You keep looking at Daddy when he isn't looking at you. And I don't know why." She gulped suddenly. "Is Daddy going to go away? Like Leanne's daddy?"

Lois listened to her very astute daughter's recitation in silence, feeling as if she'd been turned to stone by Beth's revelation. They had all tried so hard to behave normally in front of the children, and now it seemed that they hadn't succeeded at all. Although David

seemed to be his normal sunny three-year-old self, Beth - who, Lois reminded herself, was a very intelligent and sometimes introspective child - had astutely picked up on the adults' mood. And, what's more, she had assumed that it had something to do with her; that the adults were somehow punishing her for something. And the mention of her schoolfriend Leanne's father... her friend's parents had divorced a few months ago, and Lois knew Leanne was finding it very hard to adjust.

How could she deal with this? What could she say to Beth which would reassure her without actually lying? Her daughter - Clark's daughter too, she reminded herself - was extremely perceptive and had also inherited Clark's strong sense of morality. She wouldn't appreciate it if, some years in the future when she finally found out the circumstances of her father's death, she discovered that Lois had lied to her.

She settled for wrapping her arms around her daughter, holding Beth close and stroking the child's silky dark hair. She couldn't tell Beth the truth or anything approaching it, that the family would soon be losing its father, because after Clark 'disappeared' there shouldn't be any hint that his absence had been expected. And no matter how much it was reinforced to Beth that nothing should be mentioned to anyone outside the family, it was too much to expect of a child of five that she would keep the information secret.

"Beth, sweetie... I'm sorry you've been worried," Lois said eventually, trying to keep her voice light. "We're just making the most of having some time that we can all spend together. You know, normally Mommy goes out to work, and so does Daddy, but Daddy also has to do other things from time to time, so we don't always get to see as much of him as we want. And we only get to see Grandma and Granddad a few times a year."

"Yes, I know that," Beth pointed out, a little stiffly. "But why did you tell Grandma yesterday that you don't know how you'll... you'll manage without Daddy?"

< She heard me!> Horrified, Lois tried to remember the entire conversation with Martha. How much had she said? And had Beth just been nearby without anyone noticing, or was she also developing Super-hearing? < Oh, Clark, how am I going to cope with Beth and David getting Super-powers without you around?>

"Beth, honey, you know I love your Daddy very much. And when I hear about bad things happening to other people, I sometimes imagine how I would feel if it was us... if it was \*your\* Daddy who got killed in an accident, maybe. And I know we'd all be very sad if that happened. You must have heard me say something like that to Grandma, that's all."

"So everyone's all right?" Beth demanded anxiously. "You and Daddy? Grandma and Granddad?"

"We're fine, sweetie," Lois assured her, hoping that she sounded convincing enough. "And no-one's mad at you. We all love you very much." Changing the subject before Beth could ask any more awkward questions, she reached out for the T-shirt lying on the bed. "Come on, breakfast'll be cold by the time we get down if you don't hurry!"

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Downstairs, in the kitchen, Clark continued to prepare breakfast but his actions were mechanical. The conversation he'd overheard between Beth and Lois had made him feel as if someone had driven a stake through his heart. So it wasn't only Lois and his parents he was upsetting by dragging out this extended farewell, it was his children. He supposed he'd been foolish to imagine that they wouldn't pick up on the atmosphere; all four adults had certainly been behaving as if something disastrous was about to happen. Well, it was... but they'd had no business upsetting Beth and David. He had never wanted that.

And there'd been that difficult scene with Lois earlier.... It had been very clear that it was all becoming too much for her. He had no doubt that his parents were finding the tension, the waiting, equally unbearable. Was he asking the impossible of his family by expecting them to give him a few more days of normal life before he had to take off into outer space and his final encounter with Kryptonite? He was reminded suddenly of a discussion he'd had with Lois some years earlier when they'd been writing a story on families dealing with terminal illness. They had both agreed that in such circumstances they would prefer a quick death to the long, painful weeks or months of waiting to say goodbye. Okay, in his case the waiting period wasn't that long, but the endless tension was still there.

And now it was affecting the children. He would have to talk to Lois after breakfast. She wouldn't like it, but she would have to understand that he had to leave sooner rather than later.

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"Lois, can we take a walk?"

Clark's question, shortly after breakfast, didn't surprise Lois; she'd noticed his abstraction as they'd all been eating and she'd guessed he had something on his mind. Well, something apart from the one thing which was eating away at all of them, and which they avoided discussing unless it was unavoidable.

Martha quickly assured them that they would take the children down to the activity centre a couple of miles away; that would give them at least a couple of hours to talk. Lois snagged her coat from the hook in the hall and returned to where Clark stood in the kitchen, noting the wary expression on his face. Whatever it was he wanted to discuss, he expected that she wouldn't like it, she realised.

Well, she certainly couldn't tell him about the conversation with Beth, Lois decided. Over breakfast she had been wondering whether she should, but now... it was obvious that Clark was under enough strain as it was without adding to it by telling him about something he could do nothing about.

He escorted her away from the cabin along a path which led into the forest, his arm loosely around her shoulders. Lois wrapped her arm around his waist in return, shifting as close to him as was possible as they walked. This would have been a normal occurrence, something they did as often as they could when they had a babysitter: they

always loved going for long walks together. But now, with the knowledge that there would be so few further opportunities, even this beautiful morning somehow lost its power to warm Lois's heart.

Clark was silent for a while, and Lois began to worry about what was on his mind. Was he still brooding, as he had been the previous night, about how his family would manage in his absence? Or was he finally going to admit to her just how scared he was of dying?

"Clark... talk to me, please," she asked him at last.

She felt him sigh heavily; sighing was something Clark did a lot of, Lois thought wryly, wondering whether their children would take after him in that respect. Was sighing a genetic trait, or was it something they would learn by example, except that their father wouldn't be around to teach them?

"Lois... I'm sorry," he murmured gently then, confirming her suspicion that his thoughts were not pleasant. Turning to study his expression, she saw lines of worry and exhaustion on his face; not something she had ever noticed before with Clark. Clark rarely got really tired, unless he'd been up for days helping with some disaster somewhere. He frequently showed signs of distress, especially when, in his view, too many people had died before he could get to save them. But she'd never seen him quite like this, even on that dreadful evening when he had told her about the meteor.

"Clark... tell me," she said softly, her hand caressing his arm. "It can't possibly be any worse than what we're already dealing with.

"I don't know, honey," he replied slowly. "I guess... I just have to come out and say this, Lois. There's no way I can dress it up nicely." He sighed again before continuing. "I'm going to leave tomorrow morning."

"What?!" Lois halted in her tracks, staring at him in horror. Had she heard him correctly - had she *\*understood\** his meaning correctly? "Leave... for where?" she asked more calmly, praying that she was wrong.

But he turned and took both her shoulders in his hands. "Lois, you know what I'm telling you. I'm going, tomorrow, to destroy the meteor."

"But... but we have six days yet... you *\*can't\** go! Not yet... you just can't...." Her voice trailed off in a whisper as Lois tried to take in what Clark was telling her. He was going to leave them nearly a week before he had to - but why? He didn't want to go, didn't want to die, she knew that. So why was he proposing to do it even sooner than he needed? Did he think that was what she wanted - had she said something, done something, to give him that impression? She had to convince him that he was wrong. But as she stared up at him, she took in his expression: that trademark determined look he wore sometimes as Superman, the look which told criminals that they needn't waste their time trying to plead with him.

"Lois, I have to," he insisted, his voice implacable. She knew that



tone; she didn't hear it very often when her husband was dressed as himself, but it always signalled that he had made up his mind about something. "Honey," he continued, his voice softer, "I don't know about you, but I can't go through another week like this. I can't put my parents or you through it - and I can't put the kids through it."

"Like... what?" Lois asked shakily.

"Lois, you know." His voice sounded tired, or perhaps very depressed. "The tension in the air the whole time, the continual trying to pretend that this is just a vacation when we know it isn't, trying to act naturally around the kids and not succeeding, and always avoiding talking about the one thing that's never out of our minds."

"Clark..."

"Lois, I heard," he continued, not pausing to allow her to speak. "You and Beth - I heard what she asked you."

< Oh God...> "Clark, I never wanted you to hear that!" Lois exclaimed, horrified.

"I know, honey," he replied softly. "But I heard, and I... well, I realised that I couldn't let this go on any longer. How I could have imagined the kids wouldn't be affected.... Lois, Beth isn't stupid. She knows something's wrong, and we can't tell her what, and it's obvious from what I heard that she's suffering. And I just can't keep this up for another week, I can't keep pretending around her and David."

Lois fell silent, unwilling to voice her thoughts. She knew that Clark was right, that everyone had been finding the waiting extremely stressful. She had been waking up every morning counting the days and the hours which she still had left to spend with Clark, and the thought of how she would manage to go on living without him had never been far from her mind. Yes, it had been a dreadful strain - but that didn't mean she wanted him to leave her, leave their family, before he absolutely had to!

He was still watching her, his expression unreadable, but tension evident in his stance and the tiny muscle which twitched involuntarily in her jaw.

"Clark... please don't go," she pleaded, close to tears. "I need you - we all need you! Please... there has to be another way!"

"Lois, honey, we both know I have to do this. And since there's no alternative, I think I'd better just get on with it. Look," he added in a more matter-of-fact tone, "if there were things I needed to do, things you wanted me to do first, then of course I wouldn't contemplate it. But as it is, I'm just making everyone miserable here."

"And how do you think we're going to feel once you're...?" She trailed off, unable to put the dread thought into words.

He shrugged helplessly, his expression torn. "Lois, I know, and if there was any other way.... But I have to do it. And I won't put

David and Beth through any more of this."

Reflecting again on her conversation with Beth, Lois reluctantly admitted that Clark was right. It wasn't fair on the children, and anyway, she had to be honest with herself that, much as she'd wanted to make the most of their last two weeks together, she'd hated every minute of the past week. She hadn't been able to relax and enjoy being with Clark, because all she could think about was the knowledge that he would soon be taken from her.

"Clark, I don't want you to go yet," she insisted in another attempt to persuade him to change his mind.

But he drew her close, into his arms. "Honey, would it be any easier in six days' time?" His reasoned, softly-voiced question demanded an honest answer, and she swallowed before replying.

"Truth, Clark?" He nodded.

"Then, no. It won't be any easier - but then, it could never be easy to let you go," she whispered. "I did it once, and regretted it immediately - but you came back to me then."

"I know," he acknowledged. "And we both know that won't happen this time."

"No," she whispered. "Clark... I'll always love you, you know?"

"I know," he whispered in response, before lowering his head to cover her lips with his own, in a kiss which begged for her forgiveness for what he had to do.

She kissed him back, holding him to herself for a long time. Finally, they drew apart from each other and gazed silently into each other's eyes. He asked a question, and she swallowed again.

"You're right, Clark," Lois admitted at last. "You need to go. I won't stop you - but I won't give you my blessing either, you know."

"I know," he nodded briefly. "I'm not asking for it. Just your love - and your promise that you'll take care of yourself and the kids."

"I love you." Her voice husky, struggling to maintain her composure, Lois could only give voice to her feelings for him. "I'll always love you."

"I have loved you from the beginning," he quoted at her, his own voice on the verge of breaking.

"And I'll love you till the end - and beyond," she choked back.

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Clark flew towards the city, more slowly than would be his normal habit, but he wanted time to think. That conversation with Lois had been even harder than when he'd told her about the meteor in the first place, and he knew she hadn't wanted to agree to him leaving

sooner than they'd decided. And she could have stopped him; she knew that, and so did he. If she'd insisted, he would have stayed until the day they'd originally identified as his departure date.

But Lois knew only too well how much the waiting was hurting everyone; although his parents did their best to hide it, they were nearly cracking up under the strain. She was trying to conceal her own feelings, but when he'd come downstairs first thing that morning she hadn't been able to hide it from him. And the children.... He'd never wanted to hurt them, though he knew very well how his sudden departure from their lives would affect them. Much as he hated to cause his family grief, Clark knew he had no choice, and he had simply decided that their pain and suffering would be reduced if he simply got the deed over with.

So now he needed to make his arrangements; having brought Lois back to the house and left her packing for their return to Metropolis, he was on his way to EPRAD to inform them of the change of plans. He also had a few goodbyes to make, and he'd explained to Lois that he needed to do that alone. Then the rest of the day would be his family's; he planned to talk to his parents a little later to explain his decision, though he and Lois had already agreed that she would tell them what had been decided.

Then... one more night with Lois, and he would fly off to his certain death.

A little later, he landed in the alley behind the Planet; a quick spin, and shortly afterwards a smartly-dressed Clark Kent emerged and strolled into the Planet building, hurrying up to the newsroom. He nodded hellos to several colleagues as he made his way to his desk, booting up his computer and generally creating the appearance of someone busy at work. Within a few minutes, he had some files scattered about his desk, hand-written notes attached to some of them. It would look as if he'd been working on a new story, he thought in satisfaction.

"CK! What are you doing here?" Jimmy's amazed voice came from behind Clark, and he spun around to greet his friend. "I thought you and Lois were away... up in the mountains?" Jimmy continued.

"Yeah, but we decided to come back," Clark explained easily. "I got a tip-off about something which looks like it could be big - that's why I'm here today," he added, glancing around discreetly and noting with satisfaction that several of their colleagues had heard his explanation. "The Chief in?"

Jimmy jerked his head towards the editor's office. "Sure is."

Clark nodded, getting to his feet. "Great - I need to talk to him about this." Beginning to walk over to Perry White's office, he paused after a few paces, as if an afterthought had struck him. "Jimmy - come and hear this too. You might be able to help."

Jimmy fell into step beside Clark, giving his friend an enquiring glance. But Clark threw Jimmy a wry smile in return. "Not here," he said quietly. "In private."

As the two entered the editor's office, Clark sensed as well as saw Perry's wariness. Jimmy closed the door, and once the rest of the

newsroom was shut out, the editor raised an eyebrow in Clark's direction.

"Thought you and Lois were out of town for two weeks."

Clark nodded. "We were. But there's been a change of plans."

"What's happening?" Jimmy demanded anxiously.

Inhaling deeply before speaking, Clark explained quietly, "We've agreed that I'm leaving tomorrow morning. There just didn't seem any point in waiting - it wasn't making things any easier."

The other two men exchanged glances, then Jimmy approached Clark, placing his hand hesitantly on the older man's arm. "How does Lois feel about this?"

Clark grimaced. "Not good - but it wouldn't be any easier no matter when I was going to do it."

"Is there anything we can do, Clark?" Perry asked heavily.

"Yeah," he replied. "Help me with my cover story - I've made it look as if I have a new investigation, something I'm working on solo. There are notes on my desk about it, including a rendezvous I'm going to stake out tomorrow morning. You don't need to know the details, Chief, just confirm to anyone who asks that I was out on Planet business, okay?"

Perry nodded. "Clark... I know this must be very hard for you, and for Lois and your family. I just want you to know that I've been very proud to know you, and to call you a friend. The Daily Planet'll never forget you, in either guise." The editor's voice was rough-edged, as if he was trying to hold back strong emotions.

Clark swallowed, suddenly hit with a rush of emotion at his boss's words. "Thanks, Chief," he murmured huskily. "I'll always be grateful that you gave me the opportunity to work here." Quickly he stepped forward and embraced the editor, then turned to Jimmy.

"Jim - you've been a great friend to me, and I know you'll continue to be a friend to Lois, and to David and Beth," he said in a low voice.

"CK... I promise, I'll always be there for them - we both will," Jimmy choked out, tears glistening in his eyes. "Good luck...." he added awkwardly. Another quick hug, then Clark stepped back; he knew he couldn't prolong this interview. He was already finding it far too difficult as it was.

"Goodbye, my dear friends," he muttered, his voice thick with emotion, then he stepped away and was out of the door before either of the other two men could say a word.

Perry and Jimmy looked helplessly at each other as Clark strode towards the stairwell. Then the editor sighed heavily. "Jimmy, dig me up all the big Superman stories we have in the morgue - and some of the little human-interest ones as well. Once this is over, the Planet

is going to run the best, the biggest obituary we've ever done, as a proper tribute to the most decent man this country's known."

"To Superman?" Jimmy nodded approval, though he was choking back tears. There had been so much left unsaid, so much he'd wanted to tell the man he'd admired for so many years - both Superman and Clark. Clark more than Superman, he mused; the older reporter had been an inspiration to Jimmy in so many ways.

"To \*Clark,\*" Perry corrected. "Okay, we'll be running an obit for Clark as well some time in the next few days, but the big one's for him too. Even if we can't tell anyone about the man under the Suit, we can make sure that everyone understands just what he did for this world, for each and every one of us, and why we should never forget him."

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"He's going tomorrow - but why?" Martha was incredulous, staring at Lois in appalled horror.

"Because he says none of us can take the strain any more," Lois tried to explain.

"He's right, Martha," Jonathan interjected. "You've seen what it's doing to all of us. And that can't be easy for Clark. He hasn't said anything, but it's obvious he's hating this waiting. And the kids too - you heard Beth this morning, didn't you?"

"Beth? What's she been saying?" Lois demanded anxiously.

Jonathan sighed heavily. "Lois, she's noticed we've all been behaving strangely. She's got it into her head that there's something wrong with Clark or that we're upset with her over something, and let's face it, she's not far wrong on her first guess."

So Clark was right, Lois reflected sadly, although she had already accepted that his decision was for the best. "So what did you say to her?"

"There wasn't much we could say, honey," Martha replied. "Beth isn't really old enough to understand the truth, and I guess you don't want to take the risk of having her let something slip to the police or anyone else about Clark's... disappearance being expected." She grimaced, then continued, "We told her there was nothing wrong, and I've never hated lying so much in all my life."

"I'd better go upstairs and see what they're doing," Jonathan volunteered, heading for the door as he followed the sound of shrieks from upstairs.

Lois slumped against the kitchen counter. "Martha, how am I going to be able to let him go?"

"You will, Lois," her mother-in-law assured her, her own voice ragged. "You'll be completely torn up inside, but you won't let him see that because you know it's going to be just as hard for him to leave."

"Yeah, and he needs me to be strong for him," Lois whispered.

"Martha, I don't think I can do it."

Two steps, and Lois was being held tightly in Martha's arms. "Honey, I understand," the older woman soothed through her own pain. "What you and Clark have together... you're the woman he waited for all his life, the love he never imagined he'd find. I'll always be grateful to you that you loved my son, Lois."

"Martha, he is so easy to love," Lois sobbed. "I'll always wish it hadn't taken me two years to see that... two years wasted, when we could have been together...."

"Don't," Martha interrupted firmly. "I think you both needed those two years - no matter what Clark's feelings were for you in the beginning, neither of you was ready for a commitment any earlier than when you finally told each other you loved each other."

"I wasn't - I couldn't see past the Spandex," Lois admitted, bitter at her own stupidity.

"Clark was just as stupid, believe me," Martha assured Lois. "He wouldn't tell you the truth because of that crazy notion he had that he needed you to love him for Clark, not Superman. As if he'd want you to love him and hate Superman!"

"And it wasn't even as if he *was* just Clark Kent, the country boy he claimed to be, anyway," Lois added with a wry grin, the tears dissipating as she remembered the conversations she'd had with Clark on this very subject. "He made me fall in love with Clark Kent, and then I had to get used to the idea that the real Clark was someone very different! Okay, and also very exciting, and wonderful, and sexy... but I'd just given up Superman for Clark, and then I found out I was getting Superman as part of the package, only he hadn't even thought to tell me before proposing!"

Martha hugged Lois again. "You've given Clark everything he ever wanted in life, Lois. Which is why, though it's going to be almost unbearable to lose him, I'll be able to remember him the way he's been the last six years, with you. Happy, and in love. That's how I want to remember my son."

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Clark hovered in the sky above STAR Labs, trying to decide whether to see Klein dressed as Superman or as Clark. No-one ever asked why Superman was visiting STAR Labs, though sometimes when he visited as himself he had to ensure that he had some plausible excuse, such as a pre-arranged appointment with Bernie Klein, which this time he hadn't done. He just hadn't wanted to explain to Bernie over the phone the reason for his visit.

If he went as Clark, the interview could end up being as awkward and distressing as the one he'd just had with Perry and Jimmy. Also, as he'd told the scientist, Bernie was the one person who was Superman's friend, so perhaps he should go as Superman. And his being in the Suit might dissuade Bernie from getting too emotional; it was easy to quell people's instinctive reactions with a look when he was dressed as Superman.

But on the other hand... Clark sighed. He'd determined before telling

Klein the truth that all subterfuge was over between himself and the gentle, intelligent scientist who had become one of his closest friends. He landed discreetly behind the building, and a few moments later Clark Kent strolled into the research laboratories.

Knocking on the door of Bernie Klein's office shortly afterwards, Clark found himself dreading the conversation to come; repetition did not make this particular news any easier to impart. Bernie seemed surprised to see him, quickly inviting him in and closing the door behind them and picking up his telephone to tell the receptionist to hold all his calls.

"Sup... Clark, is everything all right? I wasn't expecting to see you for a few days yet...."

Thinking it was best just to come out with it, Clark replied, "Not really, Bernie. I've brought forward the date of my departure - I'm going tomorrow."

The scientist blanched. "But... Clark, Superman, you can't! It's too soon - I haven't got...."

"I have to, Bernie. I've already told the people at EPRAD. Really, I can't take any more of this, and nor can my family. I need to go."

Clark noticed that the scientist's heart-rate seemed to have increased rapidly, as if he was agitated about something. "What is it, Bernie?"

"Clark - I haven't finished the modifications to your suit yet!" he exclaimed.

Oh, to hold the oxygen tank in place, Clark remembered. "Bernie, it doesn't matter. I can hold my breath long enough to get to the meteor, and once I do, being able to breathe will be the least of my worries."

But Bernie still looked very unhappy. "Clark, please, I need to do this. I have to finish it...." He paused, calculating under his breath. "I guess I could have it finished by late tonight, if you can come by and collect it then."

Well, it couldn't hurt, Clark decided. "Okay, Bernie, I'll come back later. Not too late - I have to be with Lois tonight."

"Of course," Klein agreed. He seemed about to say more, but Clark was already on his way out of the door.

So he would have to return to STAR Labs later, although he'd already got himself psyched up for saying his goodbyes to Klein, Clark mused. He was hating these scenes already, and didn't particularly want to come back. Maybe he wouldn't, he mused, After all, he knew he didn't need the extra oxygen in order to get to the meteor. And it wasn't as if he was going to need any for the return journey - there wouldn't be a return journey.

But he would have to go back. Bernie knew who he was, and if Clark didn't return then the scientist would call him at the house, or on his cellphone, might even come over to the house. And Clark wasn't

sure that he wanted any of that. He'd give Bernie ten minutes later that evening.

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Back at the house on Hyperion Avenue, Clark found himself looking around at the familiar surroundings with a very strange sensation of not-quite-reality. This was his home - had been his and Lois's home for six years now, so he should know every corner of the place. And yet... it seemed as if he was seeing it almost as a stranger.

He knew what it was; he'd had the same very odd feeling at the Planet. He was visiting familiar places, his usual haunts, knowing that he was doing so for the last time. That knowledge was simply putting a different lens on his viewing, it seemed. Standing in his and Lois's bedroom, gazing out of the window from which he'd made so many exits as Superman, he was having a weird sense of dislocation from reality.

He had managed to speak to his parents alone shortly after he'd arrived back at the cabin, thanks to Lois's quick thinking in taking the children for a final walk in the woods. His Mom and Dad had been amazingly supportive, and he had silently thanked Lois for breaking the bad news for him in such a way that his parents understood and accepted his decision. David and Beth had been surprised and a little disappointed that they were heading back to town so soon, but Lois had covered by saying that Daddy had to go to work early the following morning, and that Mommy would probably have to go in later that day.

So now it was early evening, and he'd spent most of the remainder of the day with Beth and David; the entire family had headed out to the amusement park on the edge of Metropolis. He'd thought it was a good idea for a couple of reasons: it would give the children a good, happy memory of their final day with their father, and the adults would be so busy keeping an eye on the children that they wouldn't have time to brood. Well, not much, he amended as he looked back on the afternoon; he was aware that none of them had been able to put his impending departure out of their minds entirely.

He felt a hand on his arm. "Clark?"

Turning, he smiled wryly down at Lois, wrapping his arm about her shoulders. "Honey?"

"You were miles away," she told him, then grimaced. "Sorry. Bad choice of words."

He shook his head. He couldn't expect everyone to watch every word they said - he'd hate to think anyone was doing that. "Don't worry about it. You okay?"

She shrugged. "I can't stop counting..."

< Counting the hours...> He knew exactly what she meant; he knew to the second the time he'd told the EPRAD chiefs he'd be there, and how long he had until then. "We should go downstairs," he said instead.

"Yes, Martha and Jonathan are giving the kids their supper now," Lois



told him.

Clark grimaced. "Then we put them to bed... and that's it," he muttered. "Lois, I'm not going to wake them in the morning before I go, you know that. The less they know about what's going on, the better."

She nodded. "Come on. You have an hour with them before they go to sleep."

An hour... one more hour to spend with the children he loved more than life itself, the children at one point he'd thought they would never have, Clark reflected as he accompanied Lois downstairs. That was one thing Bernie Klein hadn't asked him about after discovering that he was Superman; the man was far more tactful these days than he'd been when Clark had first known him. But when he and Lois had first been married, Clark, as Superman, had consulted Klein about the possibility of conceiving a child with an Earth woman. Klein had run some tests, and had actually told Clark that his sperm was incompatible with a human woman's ova. That news had depressed them both for a few months; until Lois had developed an irritatingly persistent stomach bug. When she'd finally agreed to see her doctor, she'd been astounded to discover that she was actually pregnant.

They had discussed telling Klein Clark's secret then, but Lois had a very good relationship with her own doctor and wanted to be treated by her during the pregnancy; since none of the routine pre-natal checks turned up anything unusual and they were aware that Dr Klein had no gynaecological experience, they had decided not to bring him in on the secret. And as far as Clark was concerned, that baby, Beth, was a miracle child. David, following two years later, was every bit as welcome and the two children were the most precious things in Clark's life, apart from their mother.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs he paused and caught Lois's hand to delay her for a moment; taking a deep breath, he pinned a convincing grin on his face and then strolled into the kitchen.

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Standing outside the children's bathroom a little later, Lois marvelled at Clark's ability to push aside his own feelings and behave naturally in front of the children. He had been wonderful with them over supper, teasing and laughing with them as he would have before any of this had happened. After the entire family had played a riotous game of Snakes and Ladders, Clark had then scooped up both Beth and David and run upstairs with them; he was now playing boisterous games with them as he helped them to get ready for bed.

He was such a terrific father, and he deserved to see his children grow up, Lois thought for the thousandth time. It was so unfair, for Clark and for their children.

"Honey?" It was Lois's turn to glance round, feeling a touch on her arm.

"Martha! I was just...." Lois waved her hand vaguely in the direction

of the bathroom.

"I know," Martha replied. "I'm glad he's been able to keep it together tonight, for their sake."

"Me too," Lois agreed. "Are you and Jonathan sure you don't mind, about tonight...?"

"Lois, honey, of course we don't!" Martha exclaimed softly. "You and Clark need to be together tonight. I don't know what you have planned, but you two just get on out of here whenever you want. We'll see you early in the morning, before Clark goes."

Lois smiled wryly. "We really appreciate it, Martha. I don't know what we're doing - Clark just said he wanted us to go somewhere special, where we could be alone together. And that Superman was having the night off, no matter what happened."

"But he has to go back to STAR Labs first?" Martha queried.

"Yeah - he said Bernie insisted. I don't know what Bernie's done to his Suit, but if it makes things any easier for Clark...." Lois started to move down the landing, further away from the children's room, not wanting them to overhear. "Clark says he doesn't need the extra oxygen, but I just don't know. It might help."

"You think he might prefer not to have it because running out of oxygen might be an easier death than by Kryptonite?" Martha asked in a soft whisper.

Lois flinched. "Maybe - I don't know. I'm not sure what good I hope it'll do - or Bernie, for that matter. Maybe I'm sub-consciously clinging to some tiny fragment of hope that he'll be able to smash the thing without killing himself, and that he'll have enough oxygen to be able to fly back to Earth."

"Not a chance, sweetheart," a gentle voice came from behind her, and strong arms lovingly enfolded her, drawing her back against a firm chest. "Without my powers, I won't have a chance of survival in space, you know that." Clark leaned his head down so that it was resting on hers. "The extreme cold, for a start, and of course space is a vacuum, so even with oxygen survival would be impossible for anyone not Super-powered."

Lois met Martha's eyes as she listened to Clark's softly-spoken words, seeing her own grief and pain mirrored there.

Twisting in Clark's arms, she reached up and claimed his lips in a frantic, desperate kiss, which he returned in full before soothing her with his lips and his embrace. Pulling gently away from her after a few moments, he gazed down at her, love and concern in his brown eyes. "Honey, I told Beth and David you'd go and kiss them goodnight," he pointed out, shifting his hold on her so that his arm was looped around her shoulders and he was leading her back to the children's room. "I'm going to shoot off to see Bernie now, but I won't be long."

Lois stood and watched him as he turned to go into their own bedroom; a moment later she heard the soft sound of him spinning into his Superman outfit, then the whoosh of his take-off from their bedroom

window.

With a bleak inward sigh, she forced a light smile to her lips and went into the children's room.

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Bernie Klein sat hunched over his workbench in the darkened, deserted lab, scribbling figures onto a pad as his gaze flicked back and forth from the monitor in front of him. Clark hovered above the laboratory for a few moments, just watching the doctor, as he tried to garner the enthusiasm for yet another farewell.

Finally he couldn't put it off any longer, and he drifted down to the skylight he sometimes used when he didn't want Superman's presence in STAR Labs advertised. His heat vision took care of the infra-red sensor lock which had been fitted to the window some years before, and he slowly floated to the floor.

The slight rustling sound attracted the scientist's attention.  
"Superman!"

Clark X-rayed the area surrounding the lab; no-one else was around in any of the adjoining rooms. "Clark, please, Bernie."

"Oh, sure, I know, but... well, I thought you'd prefer to be called Superman when you're...." Bernie gestured vaguely in the direction of Clark's apparel.

"Usually, yes," Clark agreed. "But there's no-one else around, so...." He shrugged. "You got the Suit for me?"

"Over here." Bernie unlocked a cupboard; Clark was wryly amused to see that the scientist had to open three separate locks and one combination. He could even teach Lois a thing or two about security, Clark reflected.

He accepted the Suit, then frowned. "It's very heavy."

"Not too heavy to wear, surely?" Bernie asked anxiously. "I was sure it wouldn't be a problem...?"

"No, of course not," Clark agreed. "I was just surprised, that's all."

Bernie shrugged. "Well, it's just the fixings for the oxygen tank and one or two other minor modifications, including a little insulation against the cold. I could explain, but... well, I know my technical explanations are boring for people who don't understand what I'm talking about and I'm sure you don't want to spend the next half-hour listening to me babbling on. I just hope... well, it might help, that's all." He broke off and reached back into the cupboard again. "I almost forgot - there's these too."

Taking the gauntlets, Clark weighed them carefully in his hand. Again, heavy. "Gloves?"

"Yes, well, you see I thought they might give your hands a little initial protection against the meteor," Bernie explained. "They're reinforced with lead shavings in the lining - that explains why

they're heavier than you might think."

Clark stared down at the gauntlets, immensely touched that his friend cared enough to think of something like this. Not that it would make any difference to the ultimate outcome, of course, but not having to touch the meteor with his bare hands would save him some pain. Though of course they would also help to increase the chances of success, he mused wryly, although he suspected that would have been a secondary consideration for the scientist.

Raising his gaze again to meet his friend's, he spoke quietly.  
"Bernie - I do appreciate this. Thank you."

Bernie shook his head. "It's little enough... lord knows I wish there was more I could do, Clark!"

Sensing that Bernie was close to tears, Clark sought to distract him. He'd noticed a tiny object fastened to the belt of the Suit, and he indicated it. "What's this?"

"Oh - that's a tracer," the doctor explained. "I'm hoping it won't be affected by the temperature out there - I've insulated it against the cold as much as I can. It's linked to this monitor...." Clark moved across and allowed Bernie to demonstrate. "This monitor's hooked up to one of EPRAD's computer-telescopes, and I can follow your progress on this via the tracer - and see, there, that's the meteor."

"So you'll be able to see me smash it?" Clark asked, intrigued at the thought that, in some small way, he wouldn't be completely on his own out there the following morning.

"Just about, yes," Bernie confirmed. "And...." He hesitated, seeming to search Clark's face before deciding whether to continue. Then he took a deep breath. "And... assuming that you do eventually fall back to Earth, if the tracer's still working I'll be able to find you."

"My body," Clark amended quietly, trying to assimilate this new information. The possible fate of his dead body had been bothering him; he knew that there was a strong possibility that he would never return to Earth. He would be outside the Earth's atmosphere, and so beyond the force of gravity. He could conceivably float around in space for infinity, or he could drift into some other planet's orbit; he could end up in a crater on Mars or the moon for all he knew. But on the slim chance that his body fell to Earth, it was comforting to know that one person at least would be aware of it.

"Bernie," he said suddenly, urgently, "don't tell Lois about the tracer - at least, that it might carry on working after the impact, okay? She'll only wait and wait for news, and that'll make her even more distressed...." He broke off, his voice almost failing him. "If you do find my body, tell her then, okay? I know she'd like to know. But not otherwise." He knew very well that if his body was found on Earth, in any recognisable condition, Lois would have no right of ownership; a 'grateful nation' would take over and Superman would probably be given a State funeral. But at least Bernie's tracer would guarantee that she would hear about it from a friend.

At Bernie's nod of agreement, Clark then became businesslike again.  
"I have to go. Thank you for everything you've done for me - and for

agreeing to look after Beth and David for me."

Bernie took a step towards him, his expression awkward, unsure. "Clark... I really believe you can destroy this meteor, but I just hope... I wish...." He swallowed. "I hope to God it's not too painful," he concluded in a whisper.

"Me too, Bernie," Clark agreed. Hating this goodbye just as much as the earlier ones, he shrugged helplessly. "I... goodbye, Bernie."

Awkwardly, the scientist held out his hand to Clark, who clasped it in both of his own. As he did so, Clark wondered whether, had he come dressed as himself, Bernie would have been less formal in his farewell gesture, and a sense of guilt made him pull the older man into a swift embrace.

As soon as he stepped back, Clark floated upwards towards the skylight, carrying the Suit and gauntlets with him. He paused briefly before closing the window behind him, looking down; Bernie was watching him, the scientist's stance utterly dejected. As he closed the skylight, Clark heard the doctor mutter, "Please, God, let it work... it has to work...."

< Yes, it has to work> Clark thought bleakly as he flew home. < The future of the planet depends on me and what I do tomorrow, and I'd prefer not to die in vain....>

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Lois was reading one final story to Beth and David when she heard the soft whoosh which signalled her husband's return. Pushing aside her need to go and be with him, she decided to finish the story first, thus giving Clark and his parents a few private minutes together. Not that the Kents had any secrets from their daughter-in-law; in fact, for many years now Lois had felt closer to Clark's parents than her own. But Clark was still their son, and she knew that Jonathan and Martha also needed some time with him.

When she exited the bedroom a few minutes later, Clark was leaning against the wall outside their own bedroom. He looked weary; not tired exactly, but as if he was carrying an enormous weight inside him. He turned his head towards her as she watched him; his glasses glinted in the dull light, and she saw his face light up at the sight of her. She hurried to his side, slipping her arms around him; he embraced her in return.

"Was it very hard?" she asked him softly.

He shrugged faintly. "Could have been harder. I was in the Suit - I think that inhibited Bernie a little. Though I don't know - he's still getting used to the idea that Superman's really me." She watched him as he paused, noting the tiny furrows in his brow as he reflected on yet another painful parting. "He's really gone to a lot of trouble, Lois. I don't know what he's done to the Suit, but it's much thicker than it was, which I guess will stop me feeling the cold as much when my powers start to weaken, so I guess that'll help ensure I have enough strength left to smash the meteor. I haven't looked..." he gestured to his eyes to indicate his X-ray vision. "Somehow I'm not sure I want to know what he's done. But he also gave

me thick gloves with lead in the lining, which was really thoughtful."

"Will they help?" Lois asked anxiously. Anything which made Clark's task easier, less painful, was good news as far as she was concerned. On the other hand, she was aware, without his even having to tell her, that he didn't want any aids which were only going to keep him alive longer than necessary, thereby prolonging his agony.

But he smiled slightly. "Yeah - it means my hands won't get torn to shreds by the Kryptonite, and I should find it easier to shove bits of the meteor out into space." He pulled himself away from the wall then, drawing her into their bedroom. "Lois... I promised you this last night together," he reminded her of a discussion they'd had earlier that day. "Where do you want to go? Anywhere you want," he offered.

She had been thinking about this on and off all day since he'd first suggested it; where *did* she want to go for the final ten hours she would be able to share with her husband? There was only one thing she was sure of, and that was that she had no intention of sharing him with anyone.

So... was it to be a deserted Caribbean island, a mountain-top in South America... or the farmhouse in Smallville? What did she want to do? Talk? Walk? Make love all night... or just hold him? The one thing she knew she didn't want to do was sleep.

Suddenly, she knew. "Clark - let's go flying first. To all our favourite places - just a quick visit, then let's go to Smallville and spend the rest of the night in your old bedroom there." A last chance for Clark to visit his favourite haunts and to enjoy flying; if they went to the southern hemisphere, or far enough to the east, he'd have one last chance to fly with the heat of the sun on his back and in his face.

He nodded. "Let's go." Scooping her up in his accustomed manner, he floated them out of the bedroom window and into the night.

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How different the world seemed when you knew you were seeing it for the last time, Clark mused as he flew with Lois through the night. Every mountain, every lake and sea, every island, each little corner of the planet which he had made his adopted home was so special, so beautiful. As they flew together in virtual silence, Clark was suddenly reminded of the image of Krypton on his globe, and then he saw again in his mind the pictures the globe had shown him of his home planet exploding. That had been a horrific sight, especially knowing that his birth parents, the people he had seen in the other holograms, had still been on the planet when it had blown up.

Yet again his resolve to do what he had to do to save the Earth and all its inhabitants was strengthened. No matter what personal sacrifice he had to make, no matter that his family was having to lose him, he had to stop the meteor.

Glancing down, he saw that Lois was watching him, an expression of concern on her beloved face. "Honey?" he prompted.

"You looked so sad, Clark - I wondered what you were thinking about. Or is that a stupid question?" she murmured.

He shook his head. "No - I was probably being stupid, but I was thinking about Krypton." He didn't explain further, knowing that Lois would understand. Her hand crept up and stroked his face gently, and he knew she did. She was the other part of himself... they were twin souls, and always had been.

Spotting a familiar mountain-top below, he flew them down and once he'd touched ground, he allowed Lois to slide to her feet, still holding her in his arms. Gazing down at her face, he brought one hand up to caress the so-familiar features, his fingers shaking with the strength of his emotions. Everything - his great love for Lois, his desperation at the thought of leaving her and his family, his anxiety about the task he had to accomplish, his fear of dying - seemed to well up inside him at that moment, and he dipped his head to rest his forehead against hers, tears beginning to prick at his eyes.

"Clark." Her arms came up to enfold him, and she held him tightly. "Clark, I love you. I'll always love you."

"I will always love you too. Wherever you are, whatever you do, somehow...." He broke off, a lump in his throat. After a few moments, he continued, "Remember what HG Wells told us about soulmates?"

Lois pulled her head back so that she could look up at him. "I remember. You know, even though we were there, we *were* those people I've always found that concept, that reincarnation stuff so weird. Besides...."

"Besides, if we do meet again in another life, it won't be *you* and *me*," Clark finished softly for her.

Lois reached up to stroke his hair, slicked back as it was in the familiar Superman style. "What us being soulmates means to me is that you are the only man I could ever love, the only man I was meant to be with. I could never imagine being with anyone else - not after you," she whispered, her own voice thick.

Clark just held her for a few moments before he could formulate an answer. In one way, he was happy to think that Lois would be faithful, that his children would not some day have a new father; but then he shook himself inwardly. How could he ask her to be alone for the rest of her life? He wanted her to be happy - if she met someone else she could love, then she should go for it.

He wanted to tell her, but the expression on her face deterred him and he changed his mind. She knew, he thought. Lois knew him so well; she would know instinctively that he wanted her happiness, and should she ever meet someone else who could make her happy, she would know that she would have his permission - his blessing, in fact - to move on.

He swallowed, forcing the unwelcome images from his mind; glancing around, he realised that they were in Switzerland, and that - for Lois, at any rate - it was very cold. It was autumn, after all;

stormy weather had come early to Metropolis, he'd thought as he'd driven the Jeep back to town earlier. More rain was forecast for overnight, as well as strong winds.

That reminded him of something; as he wrapped his cape around Lois, he asked her matter-of-factly, "Do you mind if I wreck the Jeep?"

"Huh?" Not following his thought processes this time, Lois was staring at him, confused.

"Sorry - I meant tomorrow morning. You know I have to explain Clark's disappearance. I thought if I crash the Jeep.... You'll be able to get a temporary replacement from the insurance company within a day or so - you'll manage, won't you?"

"Oh...." He saw her blink, then she reached up her hand to his cheek again. "Yeah, of course. We have to protect Superman's identity... David and Beth.... Don't worry about the Jeep. It can be repaired, or if you have to total it - well, it was getting old anyway."

He nodded, unsure of what to say, but then she moved closer to him. "Clark - take me to Smallville."

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< How do you make love to someone when you know it's for the last time?>

They had been in bed for a couple of hours, their lovemaking alternately tender and frantic, slow and increasingly desperate. Clark had barely spoken, other than words of endearment and passion, and when he'd last climaxed Lois had seen tears in his eyes. Clark almost never cried; he had come close to it when he'd had to leave for New Krypton, but the tears had not come then. The first time she'd ever seen him actually cry was when Beth had been born: the midwife had placed his daughter in his arms for the first time, and his tears had flowed freely as he'd gazed down on the tiny miracle they'd thought would never happen.

And now, he'd cried again. Not that it was at all surprising; she'd cried more tears herself over the past eight days than she'd ever imagined possible.

Leaning up on one elbow, she gazed down at her husband's face. His soft brown eyes gazed up at her, his expression suggesting that he was committing every single feature of her face to memory. She reached out with her free hand and stroked his loose hair back from his forehead.

"Are you scared, Clark?" she asked him softly, at last broaching the topic they'd both been avoiding all night.

He seemed to consider for a while before answering. "Of flying into space, or of the Kryptonite?" he asked her. "Or scared that I might not be able to shatter it?"

"Well, all of those," Lois conceded. "But I really meant... are you scared of dying?"



He grimaced, and for a second or two she wished she hadn't asked the question. Then his expression relaxed and he reached for her, pulling her down onto his chest. She felt the rumble of his voice as he huskily answered her, speaking slowly, considering his words as he did so. "I guess that's the one aspect I've tried to put out of my mind all along, honey. I've thought about everything else - heck, I know I've obsessed about what I need to do to destroy the meteor, to make sure it's safely out of the way. And I know what I'm going to do, pretty much. But other than that all I've let myself think about is you and the kids, how I don't want to leave you but I don't have a choice." He paused, continuing to stroke her hair in slow movements.

Lois waited, knowing there was more to come.

"Yeah, I guess I am scared of dying," he confessed at last. "You know I've come close before, but this is different. I just have no idea how it'll feel, except that it's going to hurt. And I'll be alone. And I have no idea what's going to happen to me... after."

< Nor do I > Lois thought silently. < I won't even have your body to give you a proper funeral....>

"So I am scared, yeah," he repeated quietly. "And you know, honey, I've always thought death - premature death, at any rate - is such a waste. There's so much to do in life, so many things... it's always seemed so senseless to me when someone dies before they should."

< True > thought Lois, remembering her husband's attitude to people who threatened suicide. He could never bear to see anyone throwing their life away. He would spend long periods talking someone out of a suicide attempt, being understanding but also stern when he felt that the individual needed a good talking-to to make them realise just what they were throwing away.

"But you're not doing that, Clark," she felt obliged to point out. "You're doing this because you have to... because...."

"Because the planet will be destroyed if I don't, yeah," he concluded. "I know, honey." His arms tightened around her then, and she felt his big body shake; a few moments later she felt dampness against her temples. His tears were flowing again, and she shifted so that she could kiss them away.

But the sight of her powerful husband lying on the bed crying simply brought her own tears to the fore again, and for a long time they held each other, their tears mingling as they grieved for the parting to come.

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"Lois? Lois!" Clark shook her gently, really not wanting to wake her up at all, but he had no choice. It was time to go back.

"Honey...?" She dragged her eyes open, her pale face and dazed expression revealing that she was still half-asleep.

"Sorry, honey, but it's time to go back to Metropolis," he replied softly, wishing he didn't have to utter the words.

Lois sat up in a sudden movement, her eyes huge in her now ashen face. "It can't be! Oh, Clark, don't tell me I fell asleep? I didn't fall asleep... how could I have fallen asleep \*tonight\* of all nights?"

"Honey, you were tired. We were both tired." He tried to calm her, but she wasn't comforted.

"Clark... I only had a few hours with you, \*how\* could I have wasted them by falling asleep?" she wailed.

Clark was unable to reply; he was well aware that the morning would have come whether or not they'd fallen asleep, and no matter whether they'd lain awake talking all night or been sleeping they would still regret its coming. He took a deep breath, then forced himself to sit up, dreading what was still to come this morning before he left the house on Hyperion Avenue for ever. "Come on, sweetheart, we really need to get back."

But she grabbed his arm. "Not yet - Clark, please...." Tugging him back towards her, she reached up and kissed him passionately, desperately, pulling him on top of her. He tried to resist, being careful with his strength as always since he didn't want to hurt her.

"Lois... we don't have time," he protested.

"Five minutes, Clark, we have five minutes!" she pleaded.

< Five minutes...?> Did she want their final lovemaking to be that quick? On the other hand... he needed this, needed her passion and love to give him strength for what lay ahead of him. He allowed himself to return her kisses and, finding her already ready for him, swiftly joined them for the last time.

Forcing himself to recover quickly, he got to his feet and in less than a second was in the Suit. He turned back to Lois, who was lying on the bed watching him, tears in her eyes again. "We can shower at home, honey," he told her, then reached his hands out to her. As he tugged her into a sitting position, he murmured, "Just stay still and let me handle it."

As he had done on a number of occasions in the past when they'd been in a hurry, he moved around her at Super-speed dressing her; in under a minute she was ready and he scooped her up into his arms again.

Home; back to Metropolis, to say goodbye to his parents and then depart for his final journey.

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The house was still in darkness when they arrived back, which suited Clark. He flew them into their bedroom and sent Lois into the shower while he laid out the clothes he would need for the day. Dr Klein's modified Suit, and a business suit, tie and shirt for the first part of the day's activities.

The special Suit felt strange when he put it on; it was certainly

heavier than his others, although it fitted him just as well. He tested his movements in it; there was no sign of any impairment, so it should be all right, he guessed, whatever Bernie had done to it. The anchor points for the oxygen tank were obvious enough, and he decided that Bernie had done a good job.

He wasn't sure what he could do with the gauntlets; unlike his Suit, they wouldn't fit under his normal clothes. Shrugging, he decided that they would just have to go into his jacket pockets; it was unlikely that anyone would see him.

Lois emerged as he spun out of the Suit again; he saw her watch him with despairing eyes as he headed towards the bathroom. He wished that he could say something to comfort her; but what could words possibly do? There was no comfort for a woman about to lose the man she loved.

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Lois dressed quickly, keeping an ear out for any sounds which would indicate that anyone else in the household was awake. Clark would say goodbye to Martha and Jonathan before he left, but they didn't want the children awake, which was one reason why he was leaving so early. Clark had been afraid that the adults just wouldn't be able to hide their emotions, and that Beth and David would know there was something really wrong.

As she dried her hair, she reflected on the expression she'd caught on Clark's face as he'd headed for the bathroom. He'd looked like a condemned man, she mused, then chided herself angrily. He *\*was\** a condemned man; how else could he have looked? She just wished there was something... anything... she could say to make the task ahead, and the parting, easier for him. But the words she needed just didn't exist. What could anyone say to a man facing the fate Clark had in front of him?

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"Mom - Dad... I love you both," Clark choked out in the end. He and his parents had stumbled their way through an awkward conversation over the past ten minutes, none of them knowing what to say to ease the parting. "I'll always be grateful that you took me in and brought me up. You gave me far more than you'll ever know," he whispered. "You taught me about love, and about decency, and gave me the standards I've tried to live by all my life."

"Clark, son...." Jonathan muttered, hugging the younger man tightly. "Godspeed."

Clark swallowed and turned to his mother, whose tears were streaming unchecked down her cheeks. "Mom... thank you for everything."

Enfolding her beloved son in her arms, Martha whispered, "We'll never forget you, Clark. You'll always be in our hearts. And you'll always be a hero, for everything you did, everything you are."

He stepped back awkwardly and turned to face Lois. She was shaking, he noticed, her face pallid and set, her eyes dry. She probably had no tears left to cry, he reflected grimly. "Lois." His voice was low,

husky.

She took the few steps which brought her to him, her face tilted towards his. "Clark...."

"I don't know how to say goodbye."

"Nor do I," she whispered. "But I want you to know... I'll always love you, forever and beyond."

"And I will love you," he murmured huskily. "Always tell Beth and David I love them, too."

She nodded, swallowing hard. "Clark... you can do it. I know you can."

"I can," he repeated, his gaze fixed on hers.

"And... make it quick. Please - I can't bear the thought of you suffering," she muttered quickly.

Clark inhaled deeply, knowing that he needed to be on his way. The children would be waking up any minute now, and he had to be gone. He had stood outside their room and used his X-ray vision to watch them for a few minutes before coming down, listening to their breathing and fixing their images on his brain. He would think about them on his journey....

He took Lois's face between his hands and covered her lips with his in one final, needy kiss, then released her and stepped back, turning towards the door. His hand on the handle, he froze suddenly.

"I... can't do this," he whispered suddenly, his body slumping.

Beloved hands were gripping him suddenly; Lois's scent was beside him, his father's strong arm was about his shoulder, and Martha held his lower arm firmly. "You can do it, son," Jonathan assured him in a firm but shaky voice. "You know you can - you have the strength and the courage, it's there, inside you."

"Clark... I want you to stay, but you have to go," Lois told him. He turned to face her, and the pain and grief in her face made him want once again to sweep her up in his arms and fly her away to somewhere where they would be safe. But he looked again, and he saw the strength of her resolve. She didn't want to let him go, but she would do it because it was the right thing to do.

It was the right thing to do... and he was going to do it. Slowly, he straightened, and his hand reached for the door again.

"Goodbye. I love you," he said, his voice firm but low. Slipping through the opening, he pulled the door closed behind him.

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"Oh, God... I thought I wouldn't be able to let him go!" Lois wailed, the tears she'd been holding back for the past half-hour finally flowing, and she collapsed into Jonathan's arms.

"You knew it was the right thing," Martha assured her, touching Lois's arm comfortingly. "We all did. Clark too - he'd never have backed out."

"It's over... it's really all over this time...." Lois whispered. The last time, he had come back. And he had made a promise to her before he'd gone that he would come back, that they would be married; she'd clung to that promise and in the end he had returned, sooner than she'd ever imagined. Of course, they'd still had to get rid of the New Kryptonians, and along the way the very people Clark had been trying to help had ordered his execution, had almost scattered his molecules across the universe. She'd managed to save him then, to persuade the Council to reverse the process before it was too late.

But now, he was gone. In a couple of hours' time, at most, he would be dead. Would she feel it? she wondered suddenly. He was so much a part of her... would something inside her, the part of her which was forever Clark, tell her the precise point at which he had ceased to exist? Would she feel his pain, his fear? She'd seen it clearly enough in that instant when he'd turned to tell them that he couldn't go through with it. At that second, seeing the agony in his expression, the bleakness in his dark eyes as he fought with himself, pitting his own needs against the dictates of his conscience, she had felt as if someone was thrusting a dagger deep into her heart. It had taken all the resolve she possessed to tell him that he had to go - to let him go.

The Kents glanced at each other, then Jonathan carried his daughter-in-law to the sofa and laid her gently down. Martha crouched beside her, chafing Lois's hand as the tears fell unremittingly.

But Lois knew that she had other responsibilities; after a few minutes she pushed aside her grief to deal with later, sat up and scrubbed at her eyes. "I have to go and shower again, Martha - I can't let the kids see me like this."

"We'll see to David and Beth," Martha offered, but Lois shook her head.

"You and Jonathan are hurting too. And I have to make this seem like any ordinary morning. Daddy's already gone out, but Mommy's here and they'll expect to see me. And then I have to go out too, so you'll have to watch them then if you don't mind. Oh, Beth's school... Clark's taken the Jeep so you can't drive her there....."

"Beth's school thinks she's off for another few days yet," Jonathan pointed out. "It won't hurt her to miss another day."

"Where are you going, Lois?" Martha put in, concerned. "Are you sure you should be going out?"

"I have to," Lois replied, determined. "I'm going to STAR Labs."

Quickly she reached out and hugged both of her parents-in-law, then hurried upstairs to reach the seclusion of their - no, her - bedroom before Beth and David came in search of her. She needed a few minutes

of privacy to accustom herself to being alone in this new, Clark-less, world.

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His jaw tightly clenched, Clark steered the Jeep along the narrow road which led up into the mountains, a road which he had good cause to remember, in fact, since it led to the cliff Lois once almost drove off under the influence of Tempus's mind-control device. He was unable to shake from his mind the picture of Lois as he'd last seen her: shaking, ashen-faced, eyes bleak and lacking any animation. She had looked like a woman whose worst nightmare had come true... and \*that\* was very true.

And yet she had retained the courage to push him out the door, to remind him that he had no choice other than to go through with this ordeal. She had let him go, of her own free will, when he was sure she'd realised that one word from her could have made him stay. Could have... perhaps, but he knew that neither of them could have lived with that outcome.

Well, now it was time to dispose of Clark Kent. He was pretty sure that the plan he had come up with should suffice; although his body would not of course be found, there would be enough circumstantial evidence, as well as witnesses, for Lois or someone acting on her behalf, to get a death certificate issued. He'd left a letter for his father explaining the process which they would need to follow; he'd guessed a couple of days earlier that this wasn't exactly a conversation anyone had wanted to have with him.

He rounded the next bend and looked around him; with grim satisfaction he noted that his calculations had been perfect. A fuel tanker was coming towards him on the opposite side of the road, still some distance away, the cab occupied by the driver and an assistant. Two witnesses.

To Clark's right, the road sloped off steeply, and beneath flowed the Hobbs River; not more than about ten feet wide at this point, but deep and at the moment swiftly flowing thanks to a lot of recent rainfall. The high winds the night before had also created the kind of circumstances he needed. All around, on either side of the road, trees were battered and windswept, and smaller branches hung limply or lay, broken, on the ground.

Clark swiftly tugged at his glasses before glancing upwards and sending a blast of heat vision to a tree just ahead. The large branch he'd selected severed jaggedly as he'd planned and fell to the road just in front of him. The tanker was still approaching, so the only way to go to avoid hitting the branch or colliding with the tanker was... to the right. Down the incline, and towards the river. This was it, he thought; in a very few minutes Clark Kent would no longer exist. He was giving up the normal life he had striven for ever since he'd known that he was 'different;' in a very short time there would only be Superman. And in a short time after that.... He took a deep, shuddering breath, thinking of Lois.

He pulled sharply on the wheel, ensuring that his speed was still relatively high, and the Jeep left the road, bouncing down the incline until he was able to manoeuvre it into hitting a large rock at the right angle. It then tipped over, coming to a rest on its side

balanced precariously on a couple of large exposed rocks.

As it had tipped, the driver's door had swung open - not having been closed properly in the first place, although Clark had helped it along a little. He propelled himself out of the Jeep and allowed his body to roll helplessly down the remainder of the incline, losing his glasses along the way. Just as he was about to hit the water, he heard voices at the top calling to him, yelling that they were calling for help.

< Good... they'll see> was his last conscious thought before he tumbled into the fast-moving, freezing water.

He allowed his body to sink, knowing that this would suggest that he'd already been unconscious when he'd hit the water. Once he was well below the surface, he began to propel himself at Super-speed through the river, downstream as far as he could go without ending up in a too-highly populated area.

Surfacing at last, he glanced around; no-one was in sight. Again at Super-speed, so his movements would be invisible to the human eye, he shot out of the water and upwards, spinning into the Suit at the same time. A sharp intake of breath, and he was on his way to EPRAD and his final journey.

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Getting the children up had been a very difficult task this morning, Lois reflected as she rode in the back of a cab towards STAR Labs. For some reason, David had decided that he wanted Clark to help him wash and dress, not Lois or his grandparents. No matter how much the adults alternately cajoled him or told him off, he just yelled that he wanted Daddy.

"Daddy isn't here," Lois explained patiently for about the twentieth time.

"Where is he, then?" Beth had chimed in, pausing in the act of pulling her T-shirt over her head and making her voice sound muffled.

"He had to go out, to work," Lois had given the excuse which would later, she assumed, be given to the police.

"Want Daddy!" David had wailed.

Eventually, Jonathan had stepped in and with a combination of calm talking and some strong-arm tactics - at least, those appropriate to a three-year-old - had managed to dress the child and get him downstairs for breakfast. Both children were now watching a favourite video with their grandfather.

< Why did he have to choose \*this\* morning to make an issue over Clark not being there?> Lois wondered now with a harsh sigh. < And just how were they going to react when they discovered that Clark would never be coming home again?>

David was going to be so like Clark in appearance, Lois knew. Already he had Clark's grin, the one which had the power to make her curl up at his feet. And his eyes were precisely the same shade as Clark's,

and he could stare at her \*just\* so.... Even Beth, who looked more like Lois, had a lot of Clark's personality, and it kept revealing itself at odd moments. She already showed an interest in other people, reminding Lois of Clark's social concern, one of his most commendable traits; if Beth saw a homeless person on the street, she would give them whatever coins she had with her. She also had a way of tilting her head, and Lois had no idea whether it was somehow inherited or whether she had simply seen Clark do it and was mimicking him, but it was exactly the gesture so familiar from Clark.

At least she had them to remind her of him, a permanent and tangible reminder that Clark Kent had lived, had loved her, and had made her life so much better than she had ever imagined it could be.

Exiting the cab at STAR Labs, she hurried in past the indignant receptionist and was shortly knocking on the door of Bernie Klein's office. She heard rustling and shuffling within before the door was opened very cautiously.

"Lois! What are you...?" He seemed astounded to see her, his eyes wide.

"Clark told me about your monitor," Lois gritted out, trying to remain calm, not to become emotional again. "If I can't be with him when he flies off, then I want to see him. I need to know when...." She broke off, realising that she was again on the verge of tears.

"Come in." Standing back to allow her into the office, Bernie beckoned swiftly. Once she was inside he closed and locked the door, then flicked some switches and a monitor standing on one of the desks began to glow again. "As far as I can tell, he's probably only just got to EPRAD," the scientist explained. "The tracker's working - I've been getting a signal on it since about forty-five minutes ago - would that be about when he put the Suit on?"

Lois nodded.

"We'll be able to see when he takes off, and I can show you the meteor on the monitor - if you want to see it, that is. I mean, you might not want to...." He trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

Lois moved closer to the monitor. "I want to see."

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Clark circled EPRAD twice before he could force himself to land, all the while trying to focus his attention and energy on the task ahead of him. He couldn't allow himself to indulge in thoughts of Lois and his family and friends right now. He needed to concentrate; he had to remain calm and attentive during his final discussion with the scientists who would be updating him on the position of the meteor. At this point, there was no longer a Clark Kent; he was Superman, and Superman had to behave in the manner expected of him.

He touched down lightly on the concourse behind the building, and immediately a door opened to reveal a large group of people. They began to surge out of the building towards him, and Superman groaned inwardly as he recognised some of the group. The EPRAD scientists and



chiefs he had been expecting were there, but so also were the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, to his horror, the President and the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

His heart sank. Were they expecting him to make polite conversation before he took off? he thought incredulously.

The chief scientist approached him first, greeting him and initiating a quick discussion about the task ahead; Clark was grateful for that, since it allowed him time to calm down. Then the President and the Secretary-General walked towards him, the Pentagon chiefs just behind.

Grimacing, Clark inclined his head towards the dignitaries. "Mr President, Secretary-General Tamba," he addressed a second nod towards the African woman who had taken over at the UN about a year earlier. "I hadn't expected either of you to be here."

"Superman, with what you're doing for the future of the planet, we could not allow you to depart without assuring you of the grateful thanks of all the nations of the world," the Secretary-General explained.

"And as the leader of your adopted country, Superman, I felt it my duty to come and bid you farewell," the President added. "I want you to know that America thanks you from the bottom of its heart, and that you will always be remembered as its saviour. I have already signed an Order to establish an annual award for bravery in your memory."

< I'm not dead yet!> Clark thought savagely, but he forced himself to reply politely, if a little abruptly. The Pentagon chiefs were about to step forward, and one of them even began to hold out his hand towards Clark, but he had had enough. He didn't have to be polite this morning, Clark decided, and certainly not to these hypocrites in their military uniforms. He turned on his heel, saying as he did so, "I'm sorry, but I need to prepare for my journey."

A couple of technicians came running up with the oxygen tank, which was quite large in size, giving him about eight hours' air supply (privately, Clark had thought that this was not only unnecessary but stupid), and a further few minutes were spent attaching it to the fittings Bernie had stitched in place in his Suit. Clark pulled on the gauntlets which he'd stuck in his belt earlier, and then accepted the explosives he was handed.

Nodding towards the EPRAD scientists he had been conferring with over the past week, he then took a deep breath and glanced skywards. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the President shuffle, and realised in appalled disbelief that the man was preparing to make a speech.

< No way!> he thought savagely, and bent his knees to prepare for take-off. "I'll do my best to destroy this thing," he announced firmly, and a second later was shooting skywards.

A hubbub arose beneath him when the watching crowd realised that Superman wasn't playing ball with whatever had been planned; in the midst of the tumult, Clark heard one voice call, "Good luck, Superman. We'll miss you."

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"There! He's on his way," Klein exclaimed, jabbing his finger at the screen.

Lois followed the direction of Klein's finger, watching the tiny dot bleeping away. It was moving extremely slowly, from what she could see, but Bernie had explained that the radar to which the monitor was connected was set to a wide angle, so that both the meteor and Earth were visible at opposite ends of the screen. Clark was on his way to his death, she mused, her stomach clenching at the thought.

They had talked about it, of course, a little here and there; his fears of death, his reluctance to give up his life even in such a good cause. But now, as she watched the dot which represented her husband inching its way towards the meteor which would end his life, those conversations seemed unreal somehow. Other conversations came back to her instead: Clark asking her yet again whether she thought he should have told her about Superman sooner, asking her how she had felt when she'd asked him to freeze her to save his parents, knowing that it could kill her. He'd never until that moment, three days ago while they were at the cabin, told her just how scared he'd been that he might have killed her. Even if it had been to save his parents' life, he could never have forgiven himself.

Yes, she had almost died then, and he would have been devastated... he *\*had\** been devastated during that long, painful hour when he'd thought Bad Brain Johnson had killed her. So they both knew, already, how hard it was to lose the other....

"Will it... be very bad?" she couldn't stop herself asking suddenly.

Bernie paused before replying, and she could see the sympathy in his expression. "Lois, I really don't know," he told her. "I know the effect Kryptonite has on Superman - I mean, Clark - but this is different. It's part of the planet Krypton, and we don't really know what its composition is other than that there will be Kryptonite. The probe EPRAD sent up some weeks ago brought back a sample and there was definitely Kryptonite in that. But we don't know how concentrated it is." He inhaled deeply, then continued. "Added to that, this is deep space - I know Clark's flown into space before, but this is further than he would go under his own steam, since he wouldn't be able to get there and back within the twenty minutes he can hold his breath. And once he starts to lose his powers.... Lois, I just can't say. I can't pretend he won't be in pain, and I just can't say how long it will take before.... Oh, lord, I wish he hadn't had to do this!" The scientist slumped over his desk, breathing heavily.

"So do we all, Bernie," Lois pointed out abrasively. < Clark... and you promised me you'd never make me cry again> she thought suddenly, remembering another conversation from long ago. She turned to stare at the monitor, fixing her gaze on the tiny red dot that was Clark, visible against the black screen. He was now about equidistant from the meteor and Earth, and it was a little under ten minutes since he'd taken off. Only another ten minutes, Clark, she thought bleakly. Be sure, be very sure you want to do this.... And be quick. I don't want you to suffer. I can't bear the thought that you will....

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Space really was the loneliest place in existence, Clark thought as he drove himself on towards the meteor, the sun behind him as he flew faster and faster in the opposite direction. He could see it ahead of him now, large and menacing and, he thought, emitting a luminous green glow in parts. This was nothing like the Nightfall experience, he was very much aware. For a start, as he'd told Lois, he had been far too complacent about Nightfall, and he'd certainly paid the price for that. He was far better prepared this time, but the situation was also very different.

Would he have approached this differently if he thought there was some chance that he might come out of it alive? What Bernie Klein had told him about the military chiefs' attitude still angered him; not only that they were so uncaring about his well-being, but also that they could believe he would not take such a task as seriously as it deserved. He could, just about, see their logic: if he thought there was a slim chance that he could survive, then perhaps he would be more cautious about how he approached the meteor, might possibly try to behave in such a way as would minimise the impact of the Kryptonite on him. And as a result, perhaps he might not be as effective in smashing it. And supposing he *\*didn't\** survive, after all, then his one chance of destroying it would have been missed. Which would mean that his death would have been futile, he realised with a grimace.

Futile... he certainly hoped that would not be the case. He wanted to make sure that he did this properly, smashed the meteor into pieces so that it was no longer a danger to Earth. He wanted to *\*know\** that he'd done it, so that at least he would know, before he died, that his sacrifice and that of his family would not have been in vain.

Knowing that he wouldn't survive certainly made him more focused, he acknowledged, though he had no intention of accepting that the military chiefs had any valid point at all. He had one shot at this, and he was going to get it right. He had studied the images and the computer models, and he knew precisely at what angle he needed to hit it. He intended to smash straight through it, burying the explosives in its heart at Super-speed as he went. It all had to be done at lightening speed, before his powers gave up on him. What would happen to him when he came out the other side, he had no idea. By then he would probably have no powers left, which would leave him as vulnerable as any human male who suddenly found himself in deep space without a spaceship, a space-suit or any other means of survival.

< Don't think about that now> he instructed himself firmly; with his gaze fixed unblinkingly on the meteor now directly in front of him, he deliberately brought a picture into his mind. Lois. Lois on the couch at their home, with David cradled on her lap and Beth curled up beside her. Lois, the love of his life, his inspiration, his strength. The other half of him. Lois... who he would never see again.

Lois... the things they had talked about at the cabin, their memories of happy times, milestones in their relationship, their *\*real\** wedding, Lois telling him she had never understood what love was before falling in love with him. During their last night together,

she had told him that without him she would probably have lived out her life alone, becoming increasingly bitter and unhappy as the years went past. < You showed me that trusting someone, loving someone, doesn't mean surrendering myself; that I lose nothing and gain everything> she had told him before they'd undressed each other in his bedroom at the farmhouse.

< And you gave me something I never thought I'd have> he'd told her in response. < Someone who could love me and accept that I'm different, and a family> Lois, who had always understood him in a way no-one else could.

And to think he'd once broken up with her 'for her own good' - what breathtaking arrogance he'd shown then, he thought. She'd forgiven him long ago, of course, but she occasionally teased him about his 'noble streak' which sometimes led him into blinkered thinking. He had been afraid that she would see his decision to leave early as yet another example of such thinking, but despite her obvious reluctance, she had agreed that his decision was the correct one.

The meteor was getting closer. He needed to concentrate. < Goodbye, my love...>

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"He's getting closer." Unable to tear her eyes from the monitor, Lois was gripping the edge of the desk so tightly her knuckles had turned white. Her throat felt raw; she had no more tears left to cry, and could barely breathe as she watched the tiny dot which was her husband inch its way to its target.

Why hadn't she - they - tried harder to find some other way? She knew that Clark had insisted, again and again, that there was no other way. The nuclear option would have been catastrophic, perhaps even more so than allowing the meteor to impact. Bernie had told her earlier that there had been discussion of sending up an unmanned craft to plant explosives, but there had been some fundamental reason why that wouldn't work either: Bernie had explained it, but he was frequently unable to phrase his science in terms that non-scientists could understand, and she hadn't been in any state to concentrate that hard. No, Superman had been the only option.

Perhaps if she had appealed personally to the President, the UN... but she knew that would have been futile. Clark had told her that the UN Secretary-General had been apologetic but insistent that all attempts at finding a solution had come right back to the one option: Superman.

But Superman was also Clark Kent, a man with a wife, a family, close friends, a life... and no-one had considered what they were asking him to give up. The people who called on Superman for help time and time again never seemed to think that perhaps he might have better things to do, or that he really would rather not be stuck in some remote village for hours on end after a natural disaster when the emergency services \*could\* deal with it. Of course, Clark could never just sit back and ignore a situation like that; he wouldn't be Clark if he did. But just once in a while it would have been nice to spend holidays and Christmas together without the possibility that he would have to leave at a moment's notice.

No, no-one had ever considered that Superman had a life. And that was one point she intended to make in the article she had already planned to write on Superman's sacrifice. She'd started it the previous afternoon while Clark had been out saying his goodbyes; she would present it to the Planet as a final interview given by Superman to Lois Lane and Clark Kent, his closest friends. Although she and Clark had tried in recent years to distance themselves publicly from Superman, in order to minimise the possibility that any bad guys might just decide to use their children as a means of exerting influence over the Super-hero, there seemed little point now in denying a close relationship, and if claiming that Superman was a close friend was the nearest she could get to claiming her husband publicly, then she would do so.

And the dot was getting closer still....

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This was it, Clark thought grimly as he neared his target. One final burst of acceleration, at the same time mentally preparing himself to ensure that his reflexes were as quick as he could possibly make them. He paused briefly, surveying the meteor; the green glow was more obvious at close quarters, though he was not yet near enough, at about three miles away, for it to affect him. As he got closer, though, he could expect to feel the pain, which was why he needed to be swift and sure.

And after...? Well, he would not think about that.

He inhaled deeply from his oxygen supply, knowing that he would need all his strength. Poising himself then for flight, he inwardly gathered his resources together, drawing strength from thoughts of his close friends and family who had wished him well, told him they would miss him. One gloved fingertip brushed against the tracer mechanism which Bernie had attached to his Suit; at least someone who cared about him was watching, in a way.

< One... two... GO!> He propelled himself at full force towards the meteor, anticipating and mentally preparing himself for the pain of a Kryptonite attack. He was closer than he'd expected to be before it hit him, but when it did, it was with the force of a harsh, cold slap across the face. He almost recoiled, but managed to spur himself on to greater speed rather than allowing his pain to slow his momentum. Closer still... in another couple of seconds he could almost reach out and touch it...

"LOIS!!" he screamed into the silent void of space as his hands, then the rest of him, crashed into the meteor.

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< LOIS!!>

Lois inhaled sharply, feeling as if someone had kicked her in the stomach. Had that been Clark's voice, calling her name? But how... she had imagined it, she must have. She couldn't possibly have heard....

But however impossible it was, she couldn't prevent herself from believing that it \*had\* been Clark. She stared at the monitor again:

the dot was now indistinguishable from the meteor. Gripping the desk-top so hard that she afterwards wondered how she hadn't left the imprints of her fingertips, she whispered, "Clark... oh, Clark!"

Bernie heard the agonised whisper, and once again he cursed the fate which had set that particular piece of an exploded planet on a collision course with Earth. That good and decent man, Clark Kent, had certainly not deserved that his home planet should so spectacularly exact its revenge on him for his unwitting desertion of it as a baby. But Krypton had brought its native son, Kal-El, nothing but trouble. Its very substance was lethal to him; and the other survivors of the dead planet had almost brought about his death; they certainly hadn't cared about his life.

Why had this happened now, when Krypton had exploded thirty-five years ago? One of the Pentagon paper-pushers had actually asked why it had taken so long for this piece of the planet to arrive near this solar system, given that other meteorites had landed many years earlier. Klein had been hard put to answer, since he was aware that there were theories circulating in some senior government circles that Superman had actually been on Earth a lot longer than anyone had suspected: it seemed that some renegade government agent, about eight or ten years earlier, believed he had identified both Superman's spaceship and the location of his landing. At that stage, Klein had not been aware of Superman's real identity, but he did think it was very plausible that Superman had been on Earth longer than the few years of his public presence: he seemed too accustomed to Earth and to the American way of life to have been a relative newcomer. But regardless of whenever Superman had actually arrived on Earth, he must have arrived in some sort of powered craft, and it was perfectly plausible that the chunks of Kryptonite which had been found on Earth had travelled in the ship's wake.

A meteor, travelling under its own steam, was an entirely different matter and he had instead pointed out crisply to the administrator that in fact the real surprise was how the meteor had managed to make its way to its present position so quickly. It would have been many thousands of light-years away, he had remarked, and so should not have travelled anything like this quickly. Bernie himself had thought - and his opposite number at EPRAD privately concurred - that the meteor might well have found a 'wormhole,' a fold in the space-time continuum which allowed it to find itself on a collision course with Earth.

And therein lay the story of Superman's final encounter with his home planet, Bernie mused sadly. There'd been another conversation he'd heard at EPRAD which he had no intention of relating to Lois or anyone else: one of the UN scientists, discussing the options with other experts, had commented sarcastically that since the meteor was part of Superman's home planet, it was certainly the Man of Steel's responsibility and he owed it to the world to take care of it.

That little nugget caused Bernie to remember the phone call he had received the previous morning, from a senior administrator at the Pentagon. The officer had wanted to ensure that Bernie, being so close to Superman, had had the foresight to ensure that he had acquired a DNA sample from the Super-hero, by whatever means necessary. The purpose of such a sample, the officer had confirmed when Bernie had challenged him, was \*of course\* so that clones of the

Kryptonian could be generated. After all, his Super-powers were extremely useful to the country and the military, and if there was any chance that a replica, or several replicas, could be created, then that possibility should be exploited.

Resisting the urge to slam the phone down, Bernie had pointed out firmly that such experimentation was actually illegal, and that in any case what made Superman the man he was, the hero he was, was more than just the powers. It was his ethics, the high moral standards he set himself; and that wasn't genetic. It wasn't possible to replicate Superman.

Except that Superman had two children... Bernie made a mental note to discuss with Lois the dangers of letting it be known that there were Super-powered offspring around before the children were old enough not only to look after themselves, but to see the dangers in making themselves too accessible.

A muttered exclamation from Lois then drew his attention back to the screen. The large blob which was the meteor was disintegrating....

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He hit the meteor at a speed which, Clark felt, he'd never flown at in his life before. The irresistible force meets the immovable object, he thought inconsequentially as his body, gloved hands held out in front of him, smashed into the large object. It shattered, and the next few seconds were a blur. He was in pain, his head hurt, his eyes were streaming and he could barely focus.

Like an automaton, he concentrated on his task, tearing the explosives from their holder on his belt, which started the timing sequence for their detonation at the same time, and thrusting them at the meteor as he hurtled through it. His speed increased still further as he went, almost as if some instinct deep inside him was urging him to get away from the lethal Kryptonite, which was now sending surges of stabbing pains through his body.

He barely heard the explosion as he tumbled through the other side, spinning through space, now completely out of control. He'd done it, he thought wearily; he'd been sufficiently alert as he'd flown to realise that he had managed to smash the meteor into small enough parts, and once he'd weakened its structure the explosives would have completed the task. He was vaguely conscious of objects passing him so fast that they were merely blurs... but that couldn't be true, he couldn't possibly be travelling that fast, even with his powers at full strength he wasn't capable of flying at near light-speed. He could break the sound barrier, he'd done that many times, but this was impossible.

No, it was the effect of the Kryptonite. He could feel it coursing through his body; he ached fiercely all over, and yet the pain was not as extreme as he'd been expecting. Perhaps that was because he'd never been affected in space before? He didn't seem to be feeling the cold as much as he'd expected either... but perhaps that was because Kryptonite frequently made him feverish. That was it; he was feverish and that was keeping him warm. It had to be a fever; he was delirious. That was the only way he could explain planets and satellites passing him so fast he could barely see them.

He was delirious... losing consciousness... this was it, he was dying, he thought almost abstractedly, as if it was happening to someone else. < Mom, Dad, Lois... goodbye... I didn't want it to end like this....>

His world went black.

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"The dot's disappeared! I can't see it any more!" Lois jabbed at the screen with her finger, yelling frantically at Bernie. It had been there just a second earlier; when the meteor had disintegrated right before their eyes, she had just about managed to spot the tiny red dot against the black backdrop and the blue mass which represented the meteor. She had blinked then, and it was no longer visible.

"What does that mean? Does that mean he's dead?" She clutched at Bernie's arm, her fingers digging in painfully but the scientist didn't protest. He stared at the screen, willing the dot to appear again even though he knew its presence was by no means an indicator of life.

"It should still be there...." he murmured incredulously. "It was on his belt... it should be working...." Seeing Lois's expression, he sighed and tried to explain tactfully. "It was designed so I could track him to the meteor - I wanted to see, to be there for him somehow," he said evasively, remembering Clark's injunction not to mention his hope that he could find Clark's body in the unlikely event of it falling to Earth. "It has its own power source, so whether he was dead or alive it should still be working. It must have been smashed somehow in the impact, and it's stopped transmitting."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Lois murmured numbly. "He's dead now. It's over... I \*felt\* it, you know, Bernie. Something inside me froze just before that dot disappeared... Clark's not there any more. He's dead."

Bernie caught her as she swayed, forcing her into a chair before she could fall to the floor. As he switched into doctor mode, automatically treating her for the symptoms of extreme shock, he silently grieved for what he feared was the loss of his friend.

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< It's over....>

Lois didn't know how long she would have hidden herself away in Bernie's office, almost trying to deny the reality of Clark's death, if her cellphone hadn't shrilled ten minutes after the red dot had vanished. It had been Martha, telling her that the police were at the townhouse and wanted to speak to her.

It was about Clark, Lois had realised; whatever he'd done, they'd found the 'evidence' he would have left to indicate his 'death.' And she would have to return to have the news of her husband's fate broken to her, and she'd have to act as if it was a surprise.



Bernie had called her a cab, offering to come with her, but she'd declined his escort; she'd wanted to be alone on the journey to prepare herself for what would greet her on her return. She had been surprised to discover that the police officer who was waiting to talk with her was Inspector William Henderson. He'd quickly explained that he'd happened to hear the report come in over the precinct radio, and given that he considered Lane and Kent his friends as well as professional allies, sometimes opponents, he hadn't wanted Lois to hear the news from strangers.

"News... it's about Clark, isn't it?" Lois asked, the quaver in her voice not at all forced, the frozen lump which had been her heart getting heavier.

Martha quickly came over, putting her arms about Lois's shoulders and drawing her to sit on the couch. "Jonathan's taken the children out to the park - I guess they'll be gone for a couple of hours, honey," she murmured.

Henderson, his usual morose expression replaced by a bleak, sympathetic watchfulness, explained what had happened. "We got a call from the driver of a fuel tanker - they saw the Jeep swerve to avoid a broken branch, and it went over the embankment. They ran to help, but they saw the car on its side half-way down, and the driver had fallen out. Before they could get to him, they saw him tumble into the river. And by the time they reached the edge, there was no sign of him."

"Clark... went into the river," Lois muttered tonelessly. Yes, that would be a good way of allowing it to look as if he was dead without a body, all right. And he'd ensured that there had been witnesses, though knowing her husband he would have felt guilty for making innocent passers-by think they'd witnessed a tragedy.

Yes, a tragedy had occurred this morning; just not the tragedy Henderson was relating to her.

But Henderson misunderstood her remark. "Yes, but, Lois, you have to understand that there's very little chance we'll ever find him. We'll try - we have police divers up there and lower down the river right at this moment. But the river was flowing pretty fast this morning after all the rain we've been having, and last night's storm. He could be anywhere by now. And unless he managed to drag himself out of the water almost immediately, there's no way he could have survived. It was too cold, and the witnesses say he definitely sank straight underwater when they saw him go in. They think he was unconscious by then anyway."

"So he's dead, and we'll probably never find his body," Lois said blankly. This felt even worse than she'd anticipated; she thought she'd got over her initial reaction to Clark's death when she'd been in Bernie's lab, but hearing about the accident he'd staged from Henderson seemed far worse. Although she knew, of course, that Clark had not died in the river, the knowledge of what he'd done to provide cover for his secret was still achingly painful. A silent tear trickled down her cheek, and Martha, seated beside her, pushed a handkerchief into her hand.

Lois clutched at Martha's hand. "He's your son too.... Martha, how are any of us going to manage without him?" White-faced, she slumped forward in her seat, unable to focus on Henderson, who sat looking on helplessly. Although Lois had thought she was prepared for losing Clark, although she had already said her goodbyes, and she had accepted in Dr Klein's office that he was gone, somehow this interview with Henderson brought the reality home to her with far greater intensity.

Henderson murmured something about taking witness statements so that there would be evidence for a court, and added that he needed to know what Clark had been doing on that road.

"Inspector," Martha interjected at that point, "I understand that you need this information, but Lois isn't really able to talk about that right now. We need some time to ourselves, to get used to...."

"I understand," Henderson replied. "And believe me, it's come as a horrible shock to me too - I considered Clark a friend."

Lois looked up at this; she knew that underneath the outward air of cynicism William Henderson was a good, caring man. "Bill - I know he thought the same of you," she managed to say, forcing back the lump in her throat.

There were murmurs from the doorway then, and Lois looked around to see the uniformed officer who had accompanied Henderson trying to refuse access to a visitor.

"Perry... you've heard, then?" she choked out?

Henderson gestured, and the officer stepped back; Perry White strode into the room and over to Lois. "Jimmy picked up the report on the police scanner, and I called the precinct. Lois, I know you're still in shock, but if there's anything I can do....?"

"There is something," Henderson replied quickly. "Do you know what Clark was doing out there this morning? Mrs Kent here," he indicated Martha, "thought he was on assignment for the Planet."

Nodding, Perry drew Henderson away to the other side of the room; Lois heard the two murmuring softly, and realised that Perry was giving the detective Clark's cover story, that he'd heard about a rendezvous involving people he was investigating, and that he'd gone intending to stake it out. She sighed with relief on realising that she wouldn't have to make that explanation; then, as her gaze met Martha's, the two women fell into each other's arms, trying to comfort each other.

Some time later, when the police had left, Perry rejoined Lois and Martha. "Do you feel up to talking, honey?" he asked gently.

Scrubbing her eyes furiously, Lois met his gaze. "I should be. I don't know why it's affected me like this - it's not as if I haven't had over a week to get used to it...."

Perry paused before continuing, reaching out to squeeze Lois's hand. "Honey, I just thought you should know that Superman's... ah, journey to destroy the meteor is going to be common knowledge by this

evening." At Lois's surprise, he added, "The President and Secretary-General Tamba have called a joint press conference for late afternoon. They haven't said what it's about, other than that it concerns the safety of the planet. So my guess'd be that they're going public on this."

"Yes, sounds like it," Lois agreed slowly, as Martha excused herself to start preparing the children's lunch. "Who's covering it?"

"Now, honey..." Perry held up his hands, anticipating her demand. "Not you. I won't let you. I've already lined up Jimmy and Friez, okay?"

Lois shrugged. "I wouldn't want to go, anyway. Not considering... but, Perry, I do have a story for you for tomorrow's edition. Superman's final interview, okay? And the byline's Lane and Kent."

"If you're sure, honey," Perry replied slowly. "You know you don't have to do this - though it'd sure put a few extra percentage points on the sales figures if you really want to." He paused, considering for a moment. "Lois, I was going to run a special Planet tribute to Superman anyway - will you be okay with that?"

Why shouldn't she? Clark deserved it, and more, Lois thought as she reflected yet again on what her husband, and their whole family, had given up. Raising swollen, reddened eyes to Perry, she nodded. "Do that, Chief. It's the least he deserves, and I'd prefer the Planet to give him a decent tribute than rely on whatever those hypocrites in the government try to do to make themselves look good."

Her bitter tone, as much as her words, caused Perry to look at her sharply. "Lois?"

She gave a shuddering sigh. "Perry... the Pentagon didn't want anyone even to think about finding any way Superman could survive this, in case it made him \*complacent.\*" She spat out the final word. "Can you imagine it - \*Clark\*? When so much was at stake - can you imagine Superman not giving it all he had, at whatever risk to himself? But he was just a commodity to them, a... a tool, a useful but expendable weapon." She caught Perry's arm, taking in the look of appalled disgust on his face.

"And you can substantiate that, Lois?" he asked her slowly.

She sighed. "I'm going to have to ask my source. But there were plenty of other occasions when the military treated Superman as expendable, and I'm not going to let them forget it! And that's why I don't want to see the President crying crocodile tears over this. Jimmy can handle it."

Perry gave her a penetrating stare, but in the end didn't comment. Instead, he sighed and, in a different tone, brought up another question. "Lois, what do you want us to report about Clark? I've already started an obit for him, but I'll go with your judgement on when to run it."

The mention of Clark's obituary almost started Lois crying again, but she fought back the tears. She wanted \*Clark,\* the man as well as the Super-hero, to be remembered for his achievements, and she knew Perry

would write something she could be proud of. And Perry was right; this needed careful planning.

"I don't think it should appear tomorrow," she offered, her voice shaky. "Okay, Clark's disappearance happened the same day Superman flew into space, but I don't want his death notice - or presumed death - in the Planet on the same day. I just don't want to take the risk that anyone will associate them...." She took a shuddering breath. "Run it in a couple of days, Perry. You can excuse the delay by saying you were waiting for the police to give up the search."

Perry nodded, but before he could say anything else Lois got to her feet. "Chief, I appreciate you coming over here, and I'm glad you did, but Jonathan will be bringing Beth and David back home any minute now...."

"And you need me here like you need a hole in the head," the editor finished, instantly comprehending. "Sure, I'm on my way. But if you need anything - and I \*mean\* \*anything\* - you just call. Okay, honey?"

She could only nod.

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Telling the children had been far worse than she'd even imagined, and her imaginings had been bad enough. David simply didn't - or wouldn't - understand that Daddy would not be coming home any more, and as for Beth.... The older child had stayed behind when David had run off to find his toy train, and had sat and gazed at Lois accusingly.

"You said Daddy wouldn't go away!" Beth said mutinously once David had gone.

She hadn't actually, Lois knew, but she was well aware that her response to Beth the previous day - and had it really only been the previous morning? - had led her daughter to believe that Clark wasn't going anywhere. And she'd had to let Beth think that. But now.... She instinctively reached for her daughter, but Beth wasn't having that.

"I want Daddy!" Beth declared, on the verge of tears.

"Sweetie, you know Daddy's gone to Heaven and he can't come back to us," Lois tried to explain. She felt as if her heart was being torn out from within her as she tried to explain the reality of death in terms which a five-year-old could understand; no matter how she explained it, how many times she repeated that Clark hadn't wanted to leave, that he loved Beth and David and would have wanted to stay with them, Beth would not be mollified.

Eventually, the child refused to stay and talk any longer. Pushing Lois away, Beth jumped up and ran towards the stairs. Just before she went up, she turned back, eyes blotchy and tears streaming down her cheeks. "I hate you! You made my Daddy go away!"

Lois sat as if turned to stone. How could her daughter believe that? Had she made such a terrible mess of bringing up her children, of being a mother, that her own daughter would believe that she had

driven their father away? And what could she say to Beth to convince her that she was wrong?

"She didn't mean it, Lois." The deep, concerned voice caused her to look up, and her eyes met the understanding, sympathetic gaze of Jonathan Kent.

"Come on, you know she didn't," he continued, coming to sit beside her on the couch. "She's just upset and trying to understand what's going on. And you know how confused she was yesterday - she knew something wasn't right. But I'm sure once she calms down she'll understand that Clark didn't go because of you."

"No...." Lois suddenly realised that Jonathan was right, and she gripped his arm. "Yesterday, she thought we were all mad at her - what if she thinks \*she\* made Clark leave?"

"Then we reassure her over and over again that it's not her fault," Jonathan replied firmly. "Lois, Martha and I don't have any experience of helping young children understand death, but you know we'll help all we can."

"I know," Lois whispered. She embraced Jonathan, taking comfort from his quiet strength, then said, "I have to go to Beth. I need to talk to her."

But he shook his head. "I hear Martha talking to her. Leave it for now - you can try again later."

Her mother's instinct made Lois want to rush straight to her daughter, but she forced herself to acknowledge that Jonathan was right. Needing to keep herself busy, she went into the study instead and tried to concentrate on finishing her article on Superman.

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A couple of hours later, Lois had finally finished the article and was ready to email it to Perry. She had tried to remain as objective as possible in the circumstances, though she was very much aware that some deeply personal feelings were revealed. She'd tried to disguise that by including both bylines on the article, and occasionally adding in reflections as if from Clark and some comments which were much more in Clark's style than hers. The result was a lengthy interview and comment piece, dealing both with Superman's conviction that he had no choice but to sacrifice himself in the cause of humanity, and also the Super-hero's fears and sense of loss at what he'd been about to do. She'd used some of the things Clark had said to her on their last night together; although some of his remarks had been deeply personal and she would never repeat them to anyone, she felt that the public should understand that the decision to do this, and to go ahead with it, had not been at all easy for Superman to make. While the Super-hero might have been from another planet, he had feelings, and longings, and fears just like anyone else. Her article, she thought, would present a contrast to the tone of the Presidential press conference, which she had forced herself to watch. Both the President and Secretary-General had expressed their sadness at the loss to the world of 'a good and special man,' but had then talked about the danger which had been presented by the meteor and the impossibility of attacking it any other way, using the success of

Superman's mission as justification for asking him to destroy the meteor while knowing that it would be at the cost of his life. They had made it sound like Superman had agreed to the suicide mission without hesitation; almost as if the man had no reason to want to stay alive, Lois thought. Later news coverage had adopted the same theme: that the world would miss Superman. No-one seemed to wonder whether Superman had thought, on his last lonely journey, that he would miss the world.

And he was being awarded, posthumously, the Congressional Medal of Honor, President Freeman had announced. The medal would be displayed in a new Superman Museum, to be established in Metropolis and which would be funded by public subscription, matched dollar for dollar by the government. So citizens who mourned Superman should donate to the museum, the President explained. And the UN had its proposal for a Superman memorial, in addition: a statue would be erected outside the UN headquarters in New York.

Lois wasn't unhappy to see Clark getting public recognition in this way, but none of that compensated for having her husband torn from her when he was only thirty-five and when by rights they should have had another forty, fifty years or more together. And still at the back of her mind was the knowledge that the Pentagon had interfered in any efforts which could have been made to find a way to keep him alive, and that the President had not done anything to stop it. Okay, Clark had insisted over and over again that there was nothing which could have been done, but that didn't excuse their attitude. She had called Bernie Klein a short while ago to ask whether he would reconsider going public with what he'd overheard.

She frowned then. Dr Klein had not seemed all that surprised to hear from her, and on realising to whom he was speaking, he had interrupted her impatiently, asking whether there was any news. "News?" she'd replied blankly. "About what?" He'd quickly become confused, saying that he didn't know what he'd meant, but on reflection now, Lois realised that his manner had been very odd in the circumstances. However, when she'd asked him about her story, he had paused for a moment before answering.

"Yes. Print it, Lois, and name me as your source," he had told her emphatically.

"Are you sure, Bernie? You didn't want this to go any further than Clark and me before."

"I'm sure," he'd replied heavily. "I'm... I'm just sick of the way these Pentagon bureaucrats behave! They act as if people have no feelings, as if the rules of normal behaviour don't apply to them, just because they're in the military! They should be exposed, and I'm willing to take the flak if I have to. It's about time I spoke up anyway - I'm sick of witnessing this stuff and doing nothing about it."

"Bernie, I can cite you as an unnamed source, you know," Lois had offered quietly, very touched and grateful that the scientist was prepared to risk his own career because of his feelings of friendship for Clark.

But he had refused that offer, and so she'd written that Dr Bernard Klein, Superman's physician, was outraged and disgusted that such a

callous attitude could have been taken towards Superman's life by the very people who had prevailed upon him to agree to sacrifice himself. 'Superman agreed to do this thing in good faith. I think he would have felt deeply hurt, not to mention betrayed, to realise that the people he was dealing with were not similarly acting in good faith,' was one of the very effective quotes Bernie had in the end given Lois.

But however much satisfaction the article gave her, it could not in any way lessen the grief she felt for her lost husband and soulmate, for the loss of Martha and Jonathan's only son, and Beth and David's beloved father.

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Lois really hadn't wanted to get up and face the day the following morning. After a mainly sleepless night, in which she'd reached out for Clark too many times, she'd woken red-eyed with the realisation that it was going to be so hard to get used to his not being around. There were too many tangible reminders, such as his clothes which were still in the wardrobe, the autobiography of Nelson Mandela he'd been reading still on his nightstand, his male scent still on the bedlinen and his favourite T-shirts. Even walking into the ensuite bathroom was a reminder: the showers they'd shared, for example, and the mirror on the wall which had been necessary to his heat-vision shaving.

But she had to get up: her children needed her. Beth had finally consented to talk to her mother later that evening, and the two had spent a long time cuddling and talking. Lois hoped that Beth now understood that it wasn't anyone's fault that her daddy had gone away, died - Lois wasn't entirely sure whether Beth had grasped yet the fact that Clark was dead. She knew that Beth did understand death, at least partially, but was she refusing to let herself associate that concept with her father?

At breakfast, Beth was uncharacteristically quiet while David kept crying for his father, so much so that none of the adults could console him. Eventually Martha had to lead Lois out of the kitchen when it became clear that David's misery and continual calls for Clark were upsetting her too much. That they were also upsetting Martha was clear from the older woman's tense expression.

"Martha, I just don't know what to do!" Lois confessed, while in the background she could hear Jonathan trying to persuade David to eat his breakfast. "How can I get them to understand... am I doing something wrong? Do you think I should take them to see a therapist?"

Martha gave Lois a helpless look. "I don't know what to do either, honey, except to keep telling them over and over that you love them and that Clark loved them too. I don't know about a therapist - it might be too soon for something like that. Maybe if they're still this upset and confused in a few weeks, but we have to give them time to get used to the idea that their father's not coming home."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door; it turned out to be Jimmy. "I hope I'm not intruding...?" he began carefully once he was inside. "I wanted to see how you are and if there's anything I can do."

Suddenly David rushed out of the kitchen, a grin on his face. "Uncle Jimmy!"

"Hey there, little guy!" Jimmy teased, swinging the child up in his arms. "How're you doing?"

Lois watched in amazement as her son, who only moments earlier had been red-faced, screaming profusely, giggled and chattered to her colleague. She exchanged glances with Martha, and received an approving nod in return. Catching Jimmy's eye then, she indicated that she wanted to talk to him.

A few minutes later, Jimmy left David playing with his action figures and joined Lois in the study.

"So how are *\*you\** doing?" he asked her gently.

Lois shrugged. "Not good, Jimmy. I knew I'd miss him so much... but the reality's even worse than I thought." She pulled a face. "Did you hear what he did with the Jeep?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah - we had to write it up for today's Planet. The other papers had it, so we had to cover it - after all, he was one of ours...." He gestured towards the pile of newsprint he'd carried into the house with him. "I wasn't sure whether you'd want to see these - the main Metropolis papers, plus the New York Times, Washington Post."

Yes, she did want to read them, Lois realised. She wanted to see just how the media had reported Superman's last rescue, his sacrifice. "Thanks, Jimmy."

"Lois... everyone at the Planet's really upset, you know?" Jimmy said hesitantly. "Clark was... well, he was a real popular guy. He always had time for everyone... well, I mean except when he had to go and be - uh, you know. Well, you know that," he added, as if realising that he was saying the obvious. "But he'll really be missed."

"I know," Lois murmured bleakly. Adopting a more matter-of-fact tone then, she added, "Jimmy, thanks for coming by. I appreciate it. Um... are you going straight into work now?"

"No, actually I have the morning off," Jimmy replied, surprised. "I was working late with the Chief last night," he explained, not informing Lois exactly what he'd been working on. She could guess: the tribute to Superman.

"Jimmy, the kids have been taking this really hard," Lois told him. "In fact, David kept asking for Clark all morning - none of us could get him even to talk to us until you came." She hesitated, wondering if Jimmy would object to what she wanted to ask.

"You want me to spend some time with them?" Jimmy asked. "I'd be glad to - you know I love the two of them. They're great kids, and I get a real kick out of being with them. And you know, maybe if I took them out somewhere it would be good for them. I mean, they know me and...." He trailed off, gesturing awkwardly as he couldn't quite find the words to illustrate his point.



"And they don't associate you with telling them their daddy's not coming home," Lois finished for him. "You're right. And if you wouldn't mind taking them for a walk, or a ride on the subway, or something, that'd be a real help. It'd give them a break from us, which I guess they need. We're all trying so hard, but it's just impossible to..." she hesitated, swallowing. "Impossible to behave normally. But, Jimmy - if they ask about Clark, be honest. Tell them the truth - not about Superman or anything, but that he isn't coming back."

Jimmy nodded. "And that he loved them very much. Yeah, I know." About to leave the room, he turned back. "And, Lois - the one thing I always envied about you and Clark's relationship is how much you loved each other. I've never seen two people so much in tune with each other, so devoted - CK was really stuck on you, right from his first day at the Planet, and I'm just glad that you got together when you did."

"Me too, Jimmy," Lois murmured, while inwardly noting her friend's use of the past tense as a further recognition that Clark was really gone for ever.

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All the front pages were devoted to Superman, Lois noted very quickly as she and her parents-in-law began to read the newspaper coverage. However, while most took the angle of highlighting the threat which had been posed by the meteor, or splashing on the 'Death of Superman' angle, the Planet's front page stood apart from the rest. Perry's bold headline read 'Greater Love Hath No Man...' and the main article on the front page was the final interview with Superman, under the byline of Lane and Kent.

Tears came afresh to Lois's eyes as she read the lengthy obituary of Superman which Perry had written. Unlike the other papers' coverage, it focused on Superman first and foremost as a \*man\* rather than as a Super-powered alien. Rather than highlight Superman's many feats of strength and endurance, Perry instead talked about his innate goodness and sense of ethics, as well as his loyalty. It was a wonderful tribute to Clark, and Lois was aware that Perry would have seen it as directed as much at Clark as at the man he had become when in the Suit.

Clark's disappearance was on an inside page; the story was headed with a thumbnail photo of Clark in his work suit, and simply told how his car had gone off the road while he'd been out on a Planet investigation. The fact that police were not hopeful that he would be found alive was mentioned, but no further comment was made. Other papers were not so circumspect: the Star, on page six, carried a story headlined 'Planet reporter presumed drowned,' and dragged up many details of Lois and Clark's relationship, including their abortive attempts at getting married and the 'hints' of a relationship between Lois and Superman. Angrily, Lois screwed up the copy of the Star and threw it to the floor.

"You don't wish you could tell everyone that Clark \*was\* Superman, do you?" Martha asked, seeing Lois's action and understanding the reason for it.

"Oh - because it would stop all this horrible speculation that I

played one off against the other, or that I had an affair with Superman while married to Clark?" Lois replied with a wry expression. "Oh, sometimes it's been tempting to tell people the truth and challenge them to find some scandal in \*that\*. But protecting Beth and David is far more important, Martha. Especially now. I don't want anyone knowing they're Superman's children - who knows what could happen to them if that got out? And I wouldn't trust the government, or the Pentagon, one inch. What if they tried to take DNA samples? Or get a court order to take the kids away from me by saying they should be brought up in the care of the government because of who they are?"

Jonathan frowned. "I always did tell Clark...." He broke off, his normally steady gaze dropping as he inhaled several times in an attempt to calm himself. As Martha reached for his hand, he continued. "But Beth and David will be safe as long as all of us are here to look after them. And Perry White's a good man. If anyone tried to hurt Clark's children, he'd make sure there was an outcry."

"Yes, Perry's a good man," Martha agreed, her eyes suspiciously bright. "You know, Jimmy told me just before he left that Perry got on the phone yesterday afternoon to the editors of all the other media organisations in Metropolis and got their agreement that you'd be left alone. He didn't want anyone doorstepping you, about Clark or Superman."

That surprised Lois: Jimmy hadn't told her that. Again, she reflected that she was extremely lucky in her family and friends. Even her own dysfunctional family had been wonderful. Her parents, trying a trial renewal of their relationship, were in Europe, but they had spoken to her on the phone and promised to get home as soon as possible to help out, and Lucy was already on her way from California.

But none of these were the only person Lois really wanted.

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The next couple of days passed almost in a dull haze; there were things to sort out, such as arranging the Jeep's repair and getting a temporary replacement, easing Beth back into school and ensuring that her teachers were aware of the situation and would alert Lois or the child's grandparents to any unusual behaviour or signs of distress. Lois was aware that she also needed to do something about getting Clark legally declared dead, but she just wasn't ready to do that yet. Henderson had made that easy for her by giving her copies of the witness statements and the police report; all she had to do was to contact a lawyer. But it seemed so final; and even though she knew that Clark wasn't coming back, she left it to one side. Jonathan did offer to begin the process for her, but she felt that it wasn't fair to Clark's father to burden him with such a sad task. Although Jonathan was trying very hard to be supportive to everyone, Lois knew that he too was devastated. She had caught him staring at a recent photograph of Clark when he'd thought no-one else was around, and the big, tall farmer had been shaking.

The Planet had followed up the story on Clark's disappearance with one acknowledging that he was most probably dead, and a touching obituary appeared two days after the Superman tribute. Again, Perry

had written it himself, and a selection of Clark's articles for the Planet appeared on the same page.

Perry was being very considerate. Not only had he sorted out Lois's compassionate leave without having to be asked, he'd also reminded her that 'the Planet looks after its own,' and that Clark's salary would continue to be paid until his pension and insurance came through. Jimmy called to the house daily, spending time with David and just listening to Lois when she wanted to talk about Clark. Of course, she also spoke about him with Martha and Jonathan, but they were finding it equally difficult to come to terms with Clark's death, and so sometimes Lois felt a need to talk to someone not as intimately involved with her husband. Jimmy, who'd been Clark's friend, was the ideal confidant.

Slowly, the media fuss over Superman's death began to recede, though Lois's revelations about the attitude of the military did get a lot of attention. The Pentagon had issued an official denial, together with a defence of its earlier behaviour at times when, the spokesman had claimed, Superman had presented a real danger to people's safety. The tone of that defence, however, had done them no favours at all, as the Daily Planet was quick to point out. Public opinion quickly sided with the Planet, and the President was forced to dissociate the government and the White House from any such attitude to Superman. In the end, the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Superman looked like an attempt by the White House to appease an angry public, rather than the tribute it was intended to be.

Lois didn't care either way; not only would any of that not bring her husband back to her, but she felt that the real tributes to Superman could only come from people who'd known him and who had supported him throughout his career. It meant more to her that the directors of charitable organisations Superman had helped made moving tributes to him than that leading politicians made speeches praising him.

Memorial services were also being planned, the largest of which would be in Metropolis, Superman's home city. According to TV and newspaper reports, the mayor would give the address, and numerous dignitaries had been asked to attend. Perry White would represent the Daily Planet, the newspaper which had seemed to have a special relationship with Superman over the years; Lois had been invited as well, Perry had told her during one of his daily phone calls, but she hadn't yet decided whether she would attend. Could she possibly manage to hide her grief for her husband during the memorial service for a man who was supposed to have been no more than a friend?

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It was dark... so dark, and empty. Surely this wasn't what Heaven was like, if it did exist as Clark had always hoped? He'd expected the aftermath of death to be different somehow: perhaps not celestial choirs and harps, but at least plenty of light and someone - something - to tell him where he was, what would happen to him next. Instead, it was just dark and lonely.

He inhaled, then realised that there was something strange about that as well. He wasn't breathing from the air around him: he was using an oxygen tank. But why...? He remembered the oxygen tank all right: it had been strapped to his back when he'd left EPRAD. But why would he

still have it, be using it, now that he was dead?

Unless... unless he *\*wasn't\** dead.

But how could that be? Of course he had to be dead. There had been too much Kryptonite around for him to have survived. His powers would have vanished, and then he would have been sucked into the vast emptiness of space, dying within minutes probably, from the extreme cold if not from the Kryptonite.

It didn't make sense. But.... He frowned, realising that he was still moving. And not even under his own steam, but involuntarily, as if he had built up a momentum some time earlier and was still being carried along by it. No, none of this made sense.

< Okay...> he told himself. < It's not logical, it's not possible, but let's proceed under the assumption that I *\*am\** alive, however crazy it is... what do I do ?> The answer to that was simple: get home. As soon as possible. To Lois. < Lois!>

But where was he? He tried to look around him, searching for familiar planets, satellites. But he couldn't even see the sun! He turned so that he was facing backwards, away from his direction of travel. His eyes focused, searched, until they began to water and he had to raise a hand to brush away the tears. Then he received another surprise: the gauntlets Bernie had given him were still on his hands, a little torn now, but again, if he was really dead, why would he still be wearing them?

Down below... he squinted again - there! There was a faint glow which had to be the sun, but why was it so far away? He'd never been so far from the sun before, on any of his ventures into space. And the planets.... He scoured the vast landscape in front of him, hoping that none of the planets whose orbit was nearest to him were on the far side of the sun at present. There - at last, there was a dark blob which... yes, it was a planet, and it was some way below him - some considerable distance away, in fact.

Pluto? But how... how could he possibly have travelled so far? It would take a spaceship weeks to travel to Pluto, even assuming that it was possible, and his present location seemed to be a long way further away from the sun - well outside the solar system, in fact. And although Clark had been flying far faster than any man-made craft when he'd smashed into the meteor, he'd been unconscious since - that is, assuming he wasn't somehow dreaming and that he *\*was\** still alive. Do dead people have dreams? he wondered, bemused. Was someone playing some sort of sick joke on him?

Even if he'd been travelling quickly, wouldn't it have taken him at least a day to get as far as Pluto? Even straining his eyes as much as he could, he couldn't see any other planets, although Jupiter or Saturn should have been easier to see, being lighter. Although he had no idea where either would be in their orbit at present

So if he was somewhere past Pluto, his air supply should be exhausted. The tank he had been given was a standard size, containing eight hours' worth of air. But yet he was still breathing.

He had to be dreaming. Or... hallucinating? Perhaps this whole thing was caused by the Kryptonite. He hadn't really been unconscious, or

perhaps just for a minute or two, and he was now seeing things which were not there. That couldn't be Pluto beneath him.

And besides... he was now staring in the direction of the sun, doing his best to focus, but nothing looked right. Everything - the planets he could see, the sun, a couple of far-away stars - looked squashed, and oddly coloured. Nothing had its proper shape; fancifully, Clark imagined what he was seeing as the effect of having someone heavy sit on the universe. He laughed sardonically; he really was hallucinating.

Either that, or he had somehow been moving faster than he had ever flown before under his own power, and he was far, far from home. In which case, how his air supply had not become exhausted he could not imagine. Regardless of that, though, it would certainly run out before he could get home, assuming his powers held up that long. Which they probably wouldn't, he reminded himself; he had to be hallucinating. What he saw below him just didn't make sense otherwise.

He inhaled deeply and began to propel himself towards the sun, exerting all his strength to build up speed as quickly as possible. Initially this seemed to be a futile gesture, since his momentum was still in the opposite direction; at first, therefore, his efforts were simply serving to slow down his movement away from the sun. Was it futile? Was he wasting his time, when he was going to run out of air soon anyway? But how could he not try, when everything he loved lay ahead of him, on Earth, if he could possibly make it back? If there was even the slightest chance that he could make it....

It took almost all his reserves of strength, but gradually, after what seemed to him to be over an hour, he managed to reverse his direction of flight. He was flying towards the sun, at last. And in those last few minutes of slowing down his backward momentum, he noticed something strange. The sun had returned to its normal brilliant shade of yellow, instead of the reddish hue it had appeared to have earlier, and the planets and stars below him had resumed their normal shape, almost as if someone had pumped air back into them. < Weird > he thought. < Is the hallucination wearing off? Am I actually recovering from the Kryptonite - and if so, what does that mean? Or is this just another hallucination? >

But no matter that he was still a long way from home, that his air supply would surely give out long before he made it back, he was going to give it his best shot. Lois and his family deserved that he should try. Always assuming that this was real and not a dream or a Kryptonite-induced hallucination after all; assuming he really was alive.

< Lois! > he cried silently as he flew.

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On the fourth day after Clark had gone, Lois began to think about returning to work. Anyone she mentioned the idea to thought she was crazy, except for Martha. Her mother-in-law touched Lois's arm gently and smiled warmly at her.

"You need something to occupy yourself, honey, don't you?"

Lois grimaced. "Yeah - it's driving me crazy staying around here all the time. I mean, I know I need to be here for Beth and David, and I will - I know they're bound to feel insecure for a long while yet. But there's nothing I can do otherwise. I \*need\* to get back to work."

"I know how you feel," the older woman replied with a heavy sigh. "I'm just so glad that there's been so much to do here - if I hadn't been kept so busy with Beth and David, and with helping you pack away Clark's things...." She trailed off, her voice shaking. Lois squeezed her hand silently until Martha was composed again.

"But it'll be hard, won't it?" Martha prompted carefully after a few moments. "I mean, I know how tough it is for you here, with Clark's things everywhere - I saw you open the secret compartment yesterday and just stare at his Suits. And I saw your expression when David got his old college football out of the closet."

Lois winced. Yes, it had been painful to see David holding one of Clark's treasured possessions, although she wanted to keep mementoes like that for the children. Packing away Clark's clothes had been even harder, though she'd needed to do that: it had just been too painful to see them every time she went into the bedroom. She hadn't been able to bring herself to get rid of them yet, so they were in a trunk in the attic.

And on a couple of other occasions she'd slipped into the study on her own and gone through their photograph albums, simply staring at the pictures of Clark, tracing his familiar features with her index finger. Seeing pictures of him holding their new-born baby, first Beth and then David, brought tears to her eyes afresh. And then, further back in the cupboard, she had stumbled on an old album of Clark's. She had opened it at random, and then her breath had caught: there was a picture of the two of them together, taken the night he'd won his first Kerth.

She had been so mean to him when he'd been nominated, she'd remembered then with a rush of guilt. Of \*course\* he had deserved the nomination, but she had been so churlish, first refusing to congratulate him and then responding rudely when he'd asked her to be his date. Of course they had gone together, and they'd ended up having a great evening, \*and\* she had been so proud of him when he'd won the award.

Also in Clark's album had been a couple of pictures taken the first time he took her to Smallville. She had never realised someone had taken a photo of the two of them line-dancing, although a closer study of that picture told her why Clark had never shown it to her at the time. He had his hands about her waist as they executed a movement, and he was gazing down at her, smiling; all of his love for her was reflected so strongly in his expression that he no doubt would have been afraid to let her see it at the time. But no wonder he'd kept it....

He also had a photo of her as UltraWoman, taken in his apartment. She actually remembered the occasion as well; she'd come in through his balcony after helping at the site of a train crash. She'd been weary and frustrated, and he'd started fooling around with his camera in an attempt to make her laugh; once she'd relaxed a little he had then taken her in his arms and just listened as she'd told him how hard it

was to be a Super-hero, given all the expectations people made of her. Of course, he had known all that, and she had often marvelled afterwards at how Clark managed to separate out himself and his own needs from what he had to do and experience as Superman.

A thought struck her suddenly: supposing they had never managed to reverse the power transfer, and \*she,\* not Clark, had been the Super-hero when this meteor had been spotted? Would she have had the courage to make the ultimate sacrifice, as Clark had done?

She sighed heavily; all this sitting around at home was leading her to obsess, in the same way she used to accuse Clark of doing. And it wasn't really helping. Remembering happier times was safe; brooding over what might have been was too dangerous, too painful. She needed to get back to work.

And yes, returning to the Planet would be difficult. Clark's desk would still be there, though Jimmy had already cleared that out and brought Clark's personal belongings home. There would be memories of him everywhere at the Planet. But they would be good memories, she reminded herself, and she should be grateful for that. Every time she fetched herself a cup of coffee from the machine, she would remember that Clark had always brought her coffee in the mornings, even before they'd been dating. In later years, he had even established a habit of surprising her occasionally with a double-strength mocha and a chocolate doughnut - or if she was really lucky, a pastry from a little French bakery... in Paris. It was the little things such as those which would trigger lots of memories.

And she would never write a story without imagining Clark standing behind her, his hand on her shoulder, making comments and suggestions. In more recent years he had given up what she'd termed 'editing her copy,' but he usually had insights which she had missed, especially on human-interest stories.

But she had to accept that for a long time she would be reminded of Clark everywhere she went, with everything she did. And it would probably be better for the children as well to return them to a sense of normality, she thought. Okay, life couldn't possibly be normal without Clark, but as it was, with Lois at home all day and clearly unhappy despite trying to behave cheerfully around David and Beth, it clearly had to be unsettling for them. Beth had already been back at school for a couple of days, and it would be good for David to return to nursery. That would also free up Jonathan to return to Smallville; Lois knew that he was feeling guilty about leaving Wayne Irig to look after the farm for so long. In any case, she suspected that getting back to the farm would help Jonathan to cope with his grief in the same way as returning to the Planet would help her.

Jonathan had been invaluable over the past few days, as a source of quiet strength and support for Lois and the children, despite his own grief. Thinking about how much they had all drawn strength from Clark's father, Lois reflected that she had never before appreciated how much of Clark's own solid dependability came from Jonathan. Nurture has much more impact than nature on determining character, she considered slowly.

So if she went back to work, Jonathan could go home. Martha would stay a little longer, a week or so, until she was sure that Lois would be fine on her own. And anyway, her own parents would be home

the following day and would be just a phone call away if she needed anything.

Perhaps it would also cure her over-active imagination. Three or four times over the past twenty-four hours she had imagined she'd heard Clark call her name. The first time, it had been so real that she had actually sat up in bed and reached for him, before remembering that he was dead. And anyway, once she'd thought about it, the cry hadn't seemed to come from any external source; it had somehow been within her. But that hadn't made any sense either. She \*had\* heard Clark's voice call to her, as if telepathically, twice before: once when he'd been on the ship headed for New Krypton, and the second time just as he'd plunged into the meteor and to his death.

He couldn't possibly be calling to her now. He was \*dead,\* and she couldn't go on torturing herself by imagining his presence in spirit. He was gone.

Dead... and she winced again. She had tried not to let herself think about the circumstances of his death; she'd had to convince herself that it had come quickly, preferably within minutes. That was easier to accept than the other possibility, that he had been floating around in space, in extreme agony, for hours, if not days. No, he couldn't have survived for days, since his oxygen would not have lasted that long. She could not allow herself to dwell on the possibility that Clark might have died slowly, in agony. It would have been quick, he had told her that himself. And it had now been four days.

It was time to get back to work, some semblance of normality.

As if things could ever be normal again.

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"Bernie?" Lois was very surprised to see the scientist on her doorstep the following morning. He came in at her invitation, and quickly declined her offer of a cup of coffee. As he glanced around the living-room, seemingly looking for something, or someone, she quickly explained that the children were with her parents and that Martha was seeing Jonathan off at the airport.

"I just wanted to see how you were doing," Dr Klein excused his visit. "It was such a horrible tragedy...."

Lois grimaced, but refused to allow herself to get upset. Clark would hate to think that she was continually crying; she knew very well that he would want her to remember him with love and otherwise to get on with her life. "I'm doing okay, Bernie - \*we're\* doing okay. It helps that he did what he had to do, and that people respect him for doing it."

Bernie nodded, but Lois couldn't help noticing an awkwardness in his manner. He also seemed to be avoiding her gaze; he hadn't once looked her in the eye since she'd opened the door to him. He couldn't possibly be embarrassed, she thought; he was a close friend of Clark's, and hers also, so why should he find it awkward to talk to her in the aftermath of Clark's death? He had been so kind, after all, in his office immediately afterwards.



"Bernie - is everything all right?" she asked carefully. "It's not - no-one's threatening any reprisals for that interview you gave me about the military's behaviour?"

But he seemed surprised at her question. "Oh, no - no, not at all! Actually, my superior called me into his office the day your article appeared, and actually commended me for speaking my mind! Oh, he said that one member of the STAR Labs board had called him to complain and demand that I be dismissed, but he'd had three others call him to congratulate me. And that's nothing to the public support we've had... but you don't want to hear this, Lois."

Maybe she did, she mused; such information would normally be the stuff of her daily work. If she was back at work, she would be reporting this as a follow-up to her original article. And as she'd told Martha the previous day, it was time she went back.

But that still didn't explain Bernie's strange behaviour, so she focused her attention on him again. "Bernie? What is it, then?"

He winced, which surprised her even more. "Um... oh, lord... Lois, I just wanted to say how sorry I am, truly sorry," he exclaimed at last.

"Sorry? What for?"

Rubbing his bald pate with one hand, the scientist seemed again lost for words. "Well... sorry that I couldn't find a way to make things different, Lois. You'll never know how sorry I am...."

She leapt on his words. "Different? You mean that you didn't find a way to save Clark's life?"

He nodded.

"Does that mean you tried?" she demanded. Though that was a rather insensitive question, she realised quickly. Of course Bernie had tried; he had been through a number of alternative solutions with scientists at EPRAD and the UN, and he had explained to both Clark and herself why each of them were not practicable. On the other hand, his manner now, the way he'd expressed himself, made it sound as if he'd been referring to something else.

That was a crazy idea... but on the other hand, there had been his insistence that Clark should wear the modified Suit, she remembered. Clark hadn't wanted to go back to STAR Labs to fetch it, but Bernie had, he'd told her, become very agitated at the possibility that Clark would go without it. And Clark had later told her that the Suit was much thicker and heavier than he'd expected.

"Bernie... what did you do to his Suit?" she demanded.

He flushed. "Nothing much... it was just an idea I had, but it was a long shot, that's why I never told you or Clark about it... and it didn't work anyway, so - well, I just had to hope that it might...." He trailed off awkwardly, leaving Lois none the wiser.

"What did you do?" she demanded again, more forcefully this time.

"I... well, you mentioned a lead suit, and I told you why that wouldn't work. But then I remembered an article I'd seen in a scientific journal a few months ago, about an experimental process involving lead fibres. \*Pure\* lead fibres, instead of amalgams which would provide no protection whatsoever for Superman against Kryptonite." He stopped merely to inhale, then continued. "Well, a Suit completely constructed of lead would have been useless, but I thought that if I wove enough fibres into the lining it might just give him some additional protection, stop his powers from disappearing altogether. With the gloves as well, the only part of his body without any protection would have been his head. It was a long shot, Lois, but I just hoped... maybe... it could be enough, it might work, maybe...."

"Maybe he might come back alive," Lois whispered, aghast. "And... you didn't tell him? Or me?"

"I couldn't, Lois," Bernie muttered. "How could I raise his hopes like that? How could I have said anything, knowing how slim the chance was... he had enough to worry about as it was! I just thought - hoped - that maybe I had given him enough defence against the Kryptonite to keep him alive."

"How could you keep this from him - from us?" Lois demanded angrily. "Bernie - if Clark didn't know about this, then he might have... have done something crazy.... He was scared of dying, afraid of being in pain for hours... he could have deliberately thrown himself on top of one of the pieces and... and committed suicide!" she exclaimed, horrified, tears springing to her eyes again at the thought of what might have been. Clark \*could\* have had a chance to live - but, not knowing, he would not have been able to take advantage of it.

"Lois... Lois, please!" Bernie was now equally upset. "As far as I can tell, at the speed Clark must have been travelling, he wouldn't have been able to do anything like that. We agreed that the best way was to smash straight through the meteor and out the other side - well, with the speed he'd built up, he would have travelled quite a distance before being able to slow down. And if the lead fibres \*had\* worked, he would have noticed his powers were still there. He would have known he was going to be okay."

Eventually, Bernie's explanation began to sink in, and Lois gradually calmed. Yes, the scientist was right: Clark would have been carried out the other side by the force of his momentum. And if he had been all right after all, he would have come straight home. After all, he had his oxygen supply. That explained Bernie's strange question when she'd called him on the day of Clark's death to ask if she could quote him, she realised with a shock. He'd been hoping she was calling to tell him Clark had returned.

He had really been a good and true friend to Clark, Lois realised, her anger dissipated. Bernie had done what no-one else had even tried to do: he had come up with an idea, and put it into practice, which could have saved Clark's life. Okay, it hadn't worked, but at least Bernie had tried. And it was obvious that he was devastated that his efforts had failed. He'd told her, quietly, that the process of making the lead fibres flexible without rendering them brittle was still very experimental, and so it was perfectly possible that they could have shattered at any point during Clark's journey.

He'd never intended to tell her any of this, she realised. He had come over out of a sense of guilt, wanting to tell her how very sorry he was that he hadn't been able to save Superman, and yet he'd never intended to explain how he'd \*tried.\* But her guesswork had been too good for him, and he'd been forced to confess. She assured him that she was very grateful that he'd cared enough to try.

As she showed the scientist out a few minutes later, she stiffened suddenly. There it was again - that very strange sensation that she'd heard Clark crying out her name. But it just wasn't possible. Bernie was convinced that he was dead, despite the scientist's efforts to save him. \*She\* was convinced he was dead - she'd felt it, the absence of \*something\* the instant the meteor had shattered. And if by some slim chance he had survived the impact, he would certainly be dead by now, five days later. So how could Clark possibly be calling to her?

Suppressing the tiny fragment of hope which had briefly arisen in her heart, she went to call Perry to tell him she would be returning to work the next day.

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As she exited the elevator, Lois came to a sudden halt and just stared. Everywhere, on every wall or divider, were blowups of Planet stories. Stories all concerning one person - Superman.

A large montage covered one wall, headed 'A Hero for our Times,' and under that were huge photographs of her husband in his Suit and headlines proclaiming his courage, including the one which had gone over her final 'interview' with him, 'Greater Love Hath No Man.' The montage had a black border and to the side a cluster of handwritten letters were pinned haphazardly to a board.

On another wall was coverage of the memorial service which had been held a couple of days earlier. In the end, after lengthy deliberation and discussion with Perry, Jonathan and Martha, Lois had not attended it; she had concluded that she would be unable to pretend that her feelings for the dead Super-hero were that of a close friend only. Not wanting to risk the comment which would result if she broke down completely in public, she had decided to use the excuse that she was also grieving for her husband, still missing but presumed drowned, and was therefore too distressed to attend the Superman memorial. The Planet had instead been represented by Perry and Jimmy, and Perry had actually given one of the eulogies, on behalf, he had said, of his top reporters Lois Lane and Clark Kent, who had covered Superman right from his first appearance in Metropolis nine years before.

She shook her head slowly; first there had been the mountain of flowers and cards piled up outside the Planet building, left by citizens of Metropolis as a tribute to Superman, and now this tribute by the staff. A part of her told her that this should be painful, but something else acknowledged that it was an appropriate mark of respect to her husband, who very much deserved the accolade.

"Lois? Oh, God, I'm sorry, the Chief told me we had to get all that down before you got here but we thought you wouldn't be here until later...." Jimmy stood beside her, his expression horrified as he

stammered apologetically at her.

Touched by her friends' thoughtfulness, Lois touched Jimmy's arm lightly. "No, leave it. It looks... great. Really great. I'm sure Superman would have appreciated it too...." Still staring, she took several steps in the direction of the montage. "What are the letters?"

"Oh..." Jimmy seemed almost too taken aback by her reaction to be able to answer coherently at first. Then he pulled himself together and shrugged lightly. "Letters from ordinary people - a lot of them kids - who wrote to the Planet to say how they felt about Superman, the way he changed this country for the better, and how sad they felt at the way he...."

"The way he died," Lois finished as Jimmy stopped awkwardly.

"Yeah, that's it," Jimmy agreed. "Perry thought we might publish a selection of extracts in the weekend supplement. I know he was going to mention it to you."

It was Lois's turn to shrug. "Superman is public property. If Perry wants to do it.... Anyway, I'm glad he's getting the tribute he deserves. He always loved being able to help people," she finished on a whisper. "You know, it always tore him up, every single time, if he was just too late to save someone."

"Yeah, I know," Jimmy confirmed. "I met Superman once just after he'd gone to help at a building collapse where two people were crushed and died. He almost didn't seem to realise that a dozen or more people wouldn't be alive if it hadn't been for him - all he could think about was the two who died. And..." He gave Lois a wry smile, adding in a lower voice, "It's so weird now, knowing I was talking to CK. And I could just imagine CK thinking like that. He always did think about the 'little people,' and he taught the rest of us around here a thing or two about being too complacent or failing to recognise the human angle."

"He did that all right," Lois murmured. "It was one of the first things he taught me - and he surprised a few hard-bitten cops as well by his insistence that they respect the dignity of someone who'd just died, even a down-and-out."

She tore her eyes away from the display and headed towards her desk, deliberately not looking towards Clark's desk which was only a few feet away from hers. She couldn't avoid seeing it entirely, however, and the empty surface, devoid of Clark's personal items and the photograph of her and the children which had always stood there, drove home his absence once more.

She swallowed and focused on getting to her own desk. However, her name was called by yet another colleague, and suddenly her hand was seized by Eduardo Friaiz.

"Lois - I was so sorry about Clark - we all are. None of us could believe it - the place was in a state of shock for a couple of days, what with Clark and Superman. We all really miss him, you know. He was a really great guy."

Forcing a half-smile to her face, Lois nodded. "Thanks, Eduardo. It

was... a heck of a shock, and it's going to take some time to get over it, but life has to go on."

"That why you're here?" he asked, concerned. "I'd have thought it was a bit soon to come back to work, personally."

"What do you expect me to do?" she demanded, stung. "Sit around at home staring at \*our\* house, \*our\* things, \*our\* children all day? The kids are better off too with me back at work - they need everything to get back to normal. At least...." She trailed off, suppressing the sob before it could even reach her throat.

"As normal as it can be without Clark," Eduardo finished. "Lois, I'm sorry, truly. I didn't mean to upset you, and I guess you're right about getting back to normal." He touched her arm gently in a gesture of apology, then continued in a more businesslike tone, "I don't know what Perry has lined up for you, but he's had most of the newsroom working on the Superman story for the past few days. That was a great interview and comment piece you and Clark wrote - we've had requests for syndication from all over the world." He paused suddenly and grimaced. "I know Superman was a friend of yours too - it must be really tough for you to lose both of them at the same time."

She nodded. "If you're all covering Superman's death, then Perry'll need someone covering the normal City stories, so that'll be me."

Eduardo seemed to take the hint that Lois would prefer not to work on the Superman story; he frowned for a moment then seemed to be struck by inspiration. "Lois - did you hear about the TriMark merger plans?"

Of course she had, but that was hardly a story for the City section to get its teeth into, Lois considered, wondering what Eduardo was up to. Was he trying to suggest that in present circumstances she should simply work on the equivalent of 'dog-show' stories? As she was about to glare at him for his patronising attitude, he quickly continued.

"I know, the business news section's been handling it. But late last night a rumour emerged that one of the State senators had bought about half a million dollars' worth of shares in BradWay, the Trimark merger partner, just ten days ago."

"In other words, before the merger was announced, and before the rumours hit the press?" Lois was interested suddenly.

"Exactly," Friaz confirmed. "With that amount of shares, there has to be a suspicion of insider dealing, and since the merger had to be approved by the Anti-Trust Commission, there's every chance Wilson would have heard about it. But he didn't buy the shares himself - the rumour is that the purchase was made by the partner of one of his aides, and that the shares are in the name of the Senator's cousin."

"That's still easily traceable," Lois pointed out.

"Sure, though we'd have to prove that the senator was involved. He'll argue it had nothing to do with him, that his cousin must have met Susan Carter's partner on a visit to the senator's office or

something, and just asked him to do the deal."

"Well, isn't that possible?" Lois asked, thinking aloud.

Eduardo grinned sardonically. "Hardly - Wilson's cousin is flat broke. Couldn't afford a hundred bucks' worth of shares in BradWay, let alone half a million."

"Okay, so how reliable is this rumour?" Lois asked briskly, cutting to the chase.

"Pretty good," Eduardo answered with a grin. "Wilson's ex-wife called Perry at home last night with the allegation."

"Could just be a revenge motive," Lois pointed out. "We'd get our fingers burned if we printed on her word alone."

"Sure, and that's why Perry's been calling around all his sources since dawn this morning," Eduardo replied. "You wouldn't believe the number of favours he's called in on this."

"So who's on the story?" Lois asked briskly, surprised to find that she had already switched back into hungry-reporter mode.

"At the moment, Perry and a couple of the top business reporters, and he's getting ready to pull a couple of people off other stories to cover the political angle."

She turned away briefly to throw her purse in her desk drawer, picking up a notebook and pen at the same time. "Thanks for filling me in, Eduardo," she called then, already on her way towards Perry's office.

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This was just what she had needed, Lois recognised an hour later after having been fully briefed on the story by Perry and her colleagues in the financial and business section. A big story, requiring a lot of hard investigation, to take her mind off everything which had happened in the last few weeks. Not that she could forget it entirely; every time she thought about the best way to proceed, the sources she would need to speak to, the angles which she would need to cover, she remembered the way she and Clark had always worked together on their investigations. He was always the methodical, logical one, she the one with what sometimes seemed like crazy leaps of logic which, however, more than half the time turned out to be accurate. And once she'd learned he was Superman, he had used his powers much more frequently in their investigations, reading through large amounts of documents at Super-speed, using his X-ray vision to see where other people could not, and using his other abilities in any number of ways to help them and keep them both safe.

She missed him - oh, how much she missed him! And although Jimmy volunteered to work with her, and Perry agreed with the suggestion, it didn't stop her almost expecting to see Clark's face every time she turned around. If Jimmy brought her a cup of coffee, she would take it from him, the automatic reply 'Thanks, honey,' forming on her lips before she caught herself. And when, later in the afternoon, she caught sight, out of the corner of her eye, of a tall man in a

charcoal suit her heart instinctively leapt; until she reminded herself that it could not be Clark.

And she really thought she was going crazy when, engrossed in typing up some rough notes for the story shortly before it was time to leave to pick up the children, she again thought she heard Clark's voice calling her. It sounded so real; not \*real\* as in coming from somewhere in the newsroom, but in her head... in her heart. But that just couldn't be. Even if Bernie's lead-lined Suit had somehow protected Clark from the worst of the Kryptonite, he would have been dead long ago from lack of oxygen. Or he would have come home the same day.

No, it couldn't be Clark.

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He was hurtling through space, shooting past satellites and even planets at a rate he could never have imagined. Still unsure whether he was dreaming or in some sort of waking nightmare, every ounce of his energy was focused on reaching Earth, reaching Lois and his family. Clark thought he had probably been flying for about five hours, but he seemed to have travelled a far greater distance than he should have been able to cover in such a short time; did that mean that he was travelling at light-speed or something near it? The idea seemed impossible. He had never, even under extreme pressure, flown at anything approaching light-speed before; the possibility that he could be doing so now, when his energy levels had to be depleted by his efforts and the exposure to Kryptonite, seemed fanciful.

And yet... he could find no other explanation for the fact that he was now flying past Jupiter. Saturn and its several moons was somewhere over his left shoulder, continuing its orbit around the sun. Mars - or at least its orbit - should now be somewhere ahead of him.

About five hours, he estimated; what did that mean for his air supply? He had wanted to protest at having been given eight hours' supply, and yet the large tank had served him well. He had no idea how much air he had left; he estimated that he had probably used close to half an hour on his journey to the meteor - he'd opted to use it rather than hold his breath, since he had the option - but he had no idea how long he'd been unconscious after shattering the meteor. It was possible, therefore, that his supply could run out pretty soon.

Always assuming, of course, that this was really happening, and he really was flying home. Home to Lois... < Lois!>

And since his eyes still seemed to be playing tricks on him, there was no guarantee at all that he wasn't hallucinating. Shortly after he'd managed to reverse his direction, the planets he could see had gone saggy again, like footballs which had had all the air sucked out of them. As if that wasn't enough to make him doubt his sanity, the sun now appeared to be blue - blue? And the stars which he could see if he glanced over his shoulder had taken on a reddish hue.

But he forced himself to ignore these strange phenomena and concentrate on flying. He could now see Earth, and at the speed he was flying he reckoned that he should hit the planet's atmosphere in

a little over half an hour. His relief at that thought was tempered by the realisation that if he entered the Earth's atmosphere at a rate approaching light-speed, not only was he likely to turn into a fireball, but his impact with Earth would cause almost as much damage as the Nightfall asteroid would have.

So he needed to slow down rapidly, and he needed to start his deceleration now. < Okay....> He forced himself to breathe slowly, deliberately, and focused on reining back his instincts, which were to push himself onwards as fast as he possibly could. < It's no good getting almost all the way back home after successfully destroying the damn thing if you turn yourself into a flaming asteroid> he pointed out logically, mentally applying the brakes.

Not far now... slowing down... hey, everything's beginning to look normal again... I can see the moon... try to head for the right country, at least - where's America? Metropolis is on the north-east coast... okay, X-ray and telescopic vision working, think I'm heading in the right direction....

...oh hell, can't breathe... what's happened to the air supply... all gone... can't breathe... hold breath, not far, Earth's atmosphere just up ahead, be able to breathe then... hold on....

...everything's going blurry... Lois!!!!... help... no air... black... all black.... No!!!!

...so close, but... Lois! I can't... really dying this time....

For the second time, everything plunged into darkness.

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"Hey, Lois - thought I'd come by to see if you want a ride to the Planet," Jimmy said cheerfully, explaining his presence on the doorstep of 348 Hyperion shortly before eight am. As two pairs of small feet rushed in his direction, he immediately bent to wrap his arms around Beth and David. "Hey, short stuff! How you doing?"

Martha emerged from the stairwell to call a greeting to Jimmy. "It's good of you to come by," she added. As Lois ushered her offspring back into the kitchen to wash their hands after breakfast, Martha moved closer to Jimmy. "I know Clark would be really grateful that you're taking the time - the kids love spending time with you, and it does take some pressure off Lois."

"You too, I guess," Jimmy volunteered, giving Clark's mother a shrewd stare. Martha acknowledged his observation with a nod, and Jimmy continued, "How are you both doing, anyway? I know I see Lois at work, but she's really burying herself in this Wilson investigation - it's almost like the old Lois, the Mad Dog Lane I used to know before CK ever appeared on the scene, except that she never works late any more. She always quits dead on time to collect the kids." He paused for a moment, shaking his head briefly as if musing on the changes time and fate had wrought on his colleague and friend. "Anyway, I know it's been nine days now, which isn't long, but... well, y'know, if there's anything at all...?"



"I know, Jimmy." Martha patted his arm almost absently, a distant expression on her face as she reflected on the passage of time; had it really been nine days since she had seen her son alive? A tear threatened to spill from her eye, but she ruthlessly suppressed it: one thing Clark had been adamant about was that he didn't want - hadn't wanted, she corrected herself - his family to cry over him. He had wanted them to get on with living. Which she needed to do herself, she reminded herself with a sigh. She needed to get back to Smallville, to Jonathan and the farm. Lois really didn't need her here any more; the children were settled back in nursery and school, after-school care was organised, and Lois had her own parents a mere phone call away, as well as close friends who would be there for her at any time of the day or night.

It would be better for Lois and for Beth and David if she went back to Smallville, Martha thought. It wouldn't do for any of them to begin to regard her as a permanent fixture; and anyway, Jonathan needed her too. Everyone thought of him as a strong, self-sufficient man, but she knew better. Quite apart from needing her help on the farm, he was suffering inside over Clark's death, and he needed her support to help him accustom himself to it. Their phone calls told her as much, although he pretended that everything was all right; however, she had known this big, quiet man for too many years to be fooled.

Yes, she would go back, perhaps tomorrow. She smiled again at Jimmy, thanking whatever deities might be watching over them that this young man had grown into such a dependable and good-natured adult. Yes, Lois had some good support networks here in Metropolis, and although nothing could compensate for Clark's loss, the younger woman would get by. And Beth and David would be happy; it would take some considerable time before they stopped asking where their daddy was and when he was coming home, but they would survive. They were young enough not to be too traumatised by the experience, either.

Lois emerged from the kitchen then, her manner already businesslike. "If I go with Jimmy, that means I can leave you the car, Martha - then if you want to go out you won't have to take cabs or use the subway."

"How's the repair work on the Jeep coming along?" Jimmy asked as he bent to examine the drawings Beth and David insisted that he look at.

Lois shrugged. "They say another couple of days. It's been a bit slow, but to be honest I haven't really felt like chasing them to get it finished sooner. Every time I think of the Jeep I imagine...." She broke off, grimacing, then continued. "It's crazy, I know. I mean, it's not as if Clark really died there," she added quietly, ensuring that her words were not overheard by the children, who were chattering loudly nearby.

"I can understand that, Lois," Jimmy replied quickly. "It's all part of what happened that day, isn't it - Clark wouldn't have crashed the Jeep if he hadn't had to go... you know."

Lois nodded, not really wanting to go there again. Instead, she hugged and kissed Beth and David, reminding them that she would see them that evening, kissed Martha, and followed Jimmy out to his car.

On the way to the Planet, they discussed the Wilson investigation: Lois was now convinced that they had enough evidence to go to the senator and try to get a confession out of him. Jimmy was more cautious, reminding her that Perry had said only the previous evening that he didn't want to destroy their chances of proving the man's insider dealing by revealing their hand too soon.

"I know, Jimmy, but - " Lois began to protest, but she broke off abruptly and froze, staring straight ahead, stricken.

"Lois?" Jimmy took his attention off the road ahead briefly to glance at her. "Lois - you okay?"

Was she okay? How could she possibly explain what had just happened - that yet again she'd been convinced that she'd heard Clark's voice in her head? And this time it had been different; he had sounded agonised, desperate. She hadn't been able to distinguish any words, apart from her name, but he'd sounded in pain and as if he'd been trying to make her understand that he was sorry about something. But about what? About leaving her, about dying.... Somehow, she felt sure that was precisely what he'd been trying to tell her, but she couldn't understand why she should be hearing that from him \*now,\* when he'd been dead for nine days. Unless... she frowned suddenly, trying to remember the scanty knowledge she had about time and space; could it be that it had taken this long for his thought-waves to reach her? But that wouldn't explain how it was that she had heard him call to her at the moment of his impact with the meteor.

How could Clark be calling to her \*now\*? She was now convinced that the cries she had heard over the past few days were not just her imagination. He really had been calling out her name. She had no way of explaining it, given that he had to have been dead since some time after shattering the meteor; but it \*had\* been his voice calling her. Her heart skipped a beat suddenly as she considered the possibility that perhaps he might \*not\* have died following the impact. She had no idea how he could have survived, though Bernie's lead-lined Suit could clearly have had a lot to do with it. But there was still the question of how her husband could possibly have survived nine days in deep space without oxygen. And also the question of, if he \*was\* alive, why he hadn't come home to her, to their family?

She didn't have answers to those questions and nor, she suspected, would Bernie. Clark had never been able to explain in any adequate way the connection which had just seemed to be there between them at times; it had been entirely beyond his experience. Although he'd been able to communicate telepathically with other Kryptonians, that was nothing like the strange sense they had both sometimes had about each other. And they had never tried to explain it to anyone else; even though Martha and Jonathan were used to learning weird things about their son, both Clark and Lois had felt that this would have convinced his parents that they were crazy.

That 'connection' had seemed to tell Lois the very point at which Clark had died, she reminded herself. She had sat there, in Bernie's office, nine days ago and watched her husband's journey to the meteor, watched the dot which represented him smash right through it... and then watched the dot disappear. At that precise second, she had also felt something vital within herself extinguish. At that moment, she had known that Clark was gone.

So how could she explain her conviction, now, that she hadn't been imagining hearing him call to her? Unless... unless she was really going crazy and he'd come back in ghostly form to be with her. She laughed inwardly, scornfully, at the thought; okay, it wasn't as if they hadn't encountered ghosts - or \*a\* ghost - before, but she was still very sceptical about the supernatural. And \*if\* it was possible, wouldn't Clark have made himself known to her in a more tangible way? Wouldn't he have made sure that she knew what he was doing?

And why had his last message to her been so agonised, begging for her forgiveness in that way? None of this made sense. She sighed heavily; the only reality she could cling to was the reality of Clark's death, but that just didn't explain the way she kept \*sensing\* him calling her name. But it didn't feel like he was anywhere near her, and that elusive connection wasn't telling her where he was or what was happening. And that final cry... the one thing which did seem to make sense to her from the jumble of emotions was that Clark knew he was dying and was trying to tell her that he was sorry.

"Lois! Are you okay?" Jimmy's anxious voice intruded on her thoughts, and she shook herself abruptly, dragging herself back to the present. She realised that he'd pulled the car into the kerb and was watching her anxiously, his hand shaking her arm.

"Sorry, Jimmy - I was just thinking," she excused her abstraction, knowing that she certainly wasn't going to tell Jimmy about what had just happened. Even if he believed her, which was by no means guaranteed, she wasn't sure she wanted to share such a private, precious moment with anyone else.

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Lois's desk phone shrilled, causing her to lose her concentration on the pile of records and bank statements laid out on her desk. She had been trying to trace back the payment for the BradWay shares, but it seemed that the precise sequence of transactions was very well disguised.

"Darn!" she muttered as she picked up the receiver. "Lane?" she barked.

"Uh... Lois - have I called at a bad time?" the anxious voice of Bernie Klein asked.

Instantly Lois forgot her irritation; perhaps she could tell Bernie what she'd been experiencing over the past few days, she thought. Maybe he could come up with an explanation.... "No, it's okay, Bernie, I was just... well, it doesn't matter. What - "

He interrupted her before she could continue. "Lois, something's... I can't explain over the telephone. Can you get over to STAR Labs immediately?" he demanded.

For an instant, Lois's heart skipped a beat. This could only be to do with Clark, but what could possibly have...? "I'll be there as soon as I can get a cab," she rapped out, her gaze already searching the newsroom for a messenger boy who could be sent to summon a taxi for her.

But Bernie retorted, just before she could hang up, "Never mind. It's probably quicker if I come to pick you up. Can you be outside the Planet in fifteen minutes? And be prepared for a long journey."

A long journey? Lois mused as she replaced the receiver. What could this be about? Several thoughts entered her mind in quick succession and she damped them all down, reluctant to get her hopes up in any way. Clark was dead, and his body was probably floating about somewhere in space, if it hadn't been blown to smithereens in the explosion. But... what would Bernie consider to be so urgent, and why would he need her?

Perhaps it was something to do with what he'd told her about the Pentagon's attitude to Superman's safety, she considered after calling Martha to let her know that she might be late home. Maybe the big-wigs had decided to talk, to try to justify themselves, and Bernie had been called to the Pentagon or something; perhaps he was bringing Lois as his witness. She shrugged helplessly as she descended to the lobby in the elevator. She would find out soon enough.

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"Bernie... did I hear you correctly?" Lois demanded hoarsely five minutes after joining the scientist in his car.

"The receiver connected to the tracer I gave Clark started beeping a little under an hour ago," Bernie repeated.

"But... what does that mean?" All sorts of crazy possibilities were rushing around in Lois's brain, but she refused to allow herself to hope. Perhaps the tracer itself had fallen off Clark's belt and it had somehow started working again, she told herself.

"I'm not sure," Bernie said carefully, in a tone of voice which told Lois clearly that he was hiding something from her. She glared at him, but he was concentrating on his driving and didn't respond.

"Bernie..." she began threateningly, and then something occurred to her. "That tracer stopped working when Clark came out the other side of the meteor and it blew up. But I got the impression you were surprised when it stopped transmitting - I thought it meant Clark was dead, but that's not what you thought, is it?"

He sighed heavily, then clearly decided that it would be better to explain than to have Lois drag it from him. "No, I didn't expect it to stop. I built it so that it would withstand the impact and any explosion, and I hoped it would carry on transmitting wherever Clark was, so that I could trace his movements, even after...." He stopped abruptly, then added, "I always knew that the chances of his body falling back to Earth were very slim. But \*if\* it did, I wanted to be able to find him."

Lois inhaled sharply as this new knowledge sank in. "Did... Clark know about that?"

Bernie nodded. "I told him when I explained what the tracer was for. He... he asked me not to tell you about it unless his body did land on Earth. We both knew that if it did, you wouldn't have any rights

over him, though as his physician I might at least be allowed to examine him before any... well, before the government stepped in and planned - whatever they would want to do."

"My God!" Lois exclaimed as the possibility hit her. "Cloning - they'll finally get him in their laboratories and mess about with his DNA!"

Bernie sighed heavily. "I guess they'd want to try. But Clark was prepared for that as well - a few hours after you left that morning, Lois, I was tidying up my desk and I found a letter there addressed to me. It was from Clark - well, Superman. I've no idea when he left it there, but since he could have written it at Super-speed any time he was in my office and I'd never have known... well, who knows. But it's a signed statement that he does not consent to any experimentation on his body or cells after his death. I guess it's legally binding, and I'll make sure his wishes become public knowledge... if it's necessary," Bernie added as an afterthought.

< If it's necessary> Lois caught her breath at the reminder that Clark's body might never be found. But she pushed that aside, responding to Bernie's other comment instead. "The Planet will make sure Superman's wishes are known, and if anyone tries to go against them, there'll be an outcry," she promised in a taut voice. "But... Bernie, why did this thing start transmitting again today?"

"I don't know," he said heavily. "I just assumed at first that it must have been damaged in the impact, but that doesn't explain.... Anyway, when the receiver started beeping, I turned on the monitor and from what I could make out, the tracker device was somewhere just outside the Earth's atmosphere. I watched it for a while before calling you. It was descending pretty quickly, and it came into the atmosphere and as far as I could see it was headed for somewhere in the north of this continent. That's when I called you."

"It was coming down over the US?" Lois repeated incredulously. "That has to be something to do with Clark - it couldn't just be coincidence when the thing could land anywhere - in the middle of the ocean, even. Unless - " She broke off suddenly and stared at Bernie. "Did you fit it with some sort of homing device?"

He grimaced, shaking his head. "But, Lois, I really don't see how Clark could possibly be alive. You know his air supply would only have lasted for eight hours, and even if the lead fibres did help him, he'd have run out of air days ago."

"I know, Bernie, but...." Lois stared at him, her jaw tense. "I don't know how it can be explained, but for the past few days I've thought I heard him calling to me." Quietly, unemotionally, she explained her conviction that she had heard Clark calling her name several times in the past five or six days.

Bernie listened, nodding but not commenting, until she'd finished. Finally, he sighed and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he thought, then he glanced at her. "Lois, I'm not sure I can come up with an explanation of this right now. It's certainly a very interesting phenomenon, and I'd love to study it further... but unless something else happened to Clark after he smashed the meteor, I really don't see how he could possibly be alive."

"He isn't," Lois replied bluntly. "I know he isn't. It's weird - I felt the connection between us die the instant he came out the other side of that meteor, but over the past few days it's almost as if it's been there, intermittently. But this morning... I'm not sure what he was trying to tell me, but it sounded final. I sensed that he knew he was dying, and he was trying to tell me he was sorry."

She saw Bernie's jaw clench at that, and he focused his attention more closely on his driving. Curiosity overcame her then, and she changed the subject. "Where are we going?"

He glanced at her then. "From what I could tell, the tracer seemed to be heading for the next state, and I'm trying to follow the signal now."

"You've got the receiver in the car?" Lois demanded.

He nodded. "For a while, it was showing me the device's flight path, but it seemed to have landed about fifteen minutes ago - just near the State line, from what I can tell."

Lois clenched the dashboard in front of her, unable to speak. Bernie glanced at her again.

"Lois, you know I have no idea what we're likely to find," he pointed out gently. "This could be a mistake...." he added, more to himself than to her. "I want you to promise that when we get there, you let me look first."

"Not a chance!" she retorted angrily. "This is my husband we're talking about! I don't care what we find - if it's even part of him, I want to see it. I want to \*feel\* him... to know he's really dead. I know I can feel he's gone, but... I want to see."

Bernie sighed again, as if realising he was not going to win against Lois Lane. The drive continued in silence, the tension in the car palpable as both wondered what they would find at the end of their journey.

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"I think it's somewhere around here," Bernie said at last, bringing the car to a halt in a rest area just off the freeway.

Lois glanced around warily. "I just hope whatever... well, that it didn't land \*on\* the freeway," she finished with a shudder.

But Bernie shook his head. "From what I can tell, the signal seems to be coming from somewhere over there." He gestured towards the rough ground behind the facilities.

"Then let's go," Lois gritted, jumping out of the car and barely waiting for Bernie to gather together some items from the back. She glanced at what he was carrying, noting that he seemed to have a medical bag as well as a blanket and a couple of other things.

"Just wanting to be prepared for all eventualities," he muttered, seeing her glance.

She flinched and concentrated on walking. "Which way?" she asked after a moment.

With his free hand, Bernie gestured ahead and to the right; Lois hurried on, anxious to see what was there. She came to a halt with a gasp a couple of minutes later. Just in front, a crater had appeared in the ground, apparently not from any natural cause.

"Bernie!" she whispered, for a split second afraid to go any further. But as Dr Klein caught up with her, she spotted a flash of red - a shade of red she knew very well. She ran forward with a cry, not allowing herself to think about what she might find.

Clark lay sprawled face-up in the crater, his Suit torn to ribbons with strips of lead from the lining now visible, twisted and glinting in the sunlight, his cape shredded and burnt at the ends, the gauntlets still incongruously on his hands. His face was blackened, his hair singed around the edges and his boots apparently partly melted. Behind him lay the remains of what had once been an oxygen tank, the tubes melted away to an unpleasant-smelling mess.

Lois ran to him, falling to her knees by his side and showering his face with kisses. He felt oddly warm, but that probably wasn't surprising given that his body had to have re-entered the Earth's atmosphere at quite a speed given the fire damage and the size of the crater. She grabbed at his hands, tears streaming from her eyes; she'd got Clark back. No matter that he was dead, no matter that the government would no doubt claim Superman's body as soon as they realised....

But who said they would realise? At once the solution struck her. They would wrap him in a blanket and carry him to Bernie's car, then drive him back to Hyperion Avenue. Once inside, they would get rid of the Suit and dress him in some of Clark's clothes, and Bernie, as a family friend as well as a doctor, could be persuaded to say that he'd performed an autopsy and sign the death certificate, couldn't he? Then the family could have their own funeral for Clark Kent, rather than having to stay in the background while the government did what they wanted with Superman's body....

She was so engrossed in working out her plan that she barely noticed what Bernie was up to. He broke into her musings then, however, by grabbing at her arm. "Lois! Get back and give me some room here!"

Automatically, she obeyed, but she stared at him as he leaned over Clark, reaching into his medical bag simultaneously. "Bernie... what's going on?"

"He's alive," came the barely audible mutter. "God knows how, but I can feel a heartbeat. It's very faint, very bradycardic.... Lois, there's an oxygen mask in my bag, find it, please!" he rapped at her as he pulled up one eyelid and examined the pupil for responsiveness.

Clark was alive! At first Lois wasn't even sure that she'd heard her friend correctly, but Bernie's impatient gesture assured her that he had indeed said it. Barely able to believe what was happening, Lois seized the mask and attached bag like an automaton and held it out to her friend. He shook his head. "No - wait until I've checked his

airway." Lois watched while the doctor opened Clark's mouth and shone a penlight down his throat, running a finger around the inside of his mouth. "Okay, he's clear. Put it over his nose and mouth - yes, like that. Hold it there. That'll help his breathing."

Doing what she was told, Lois gazed across at Bernie, her breath caught in her throat. Her husband was alive; he had survived an encounter with Kryptonite which should have killed him; which they had all assumed would kill him. She had been convinced he was dead; she had even felt the 'connection' break the instant the red dot had disappeared. Although... that fact had simply not jelled with her conviction that Clark had been calling to her over the past few days. Why had she not believed the evidence of her own heart? He had been calling to her, letting her know that he was alive, and she had heard his cries but hadn't understood their significance.

And yet... his final cry, just that morning, had seemed *\*very\** final; he really had seemed to be telling her then that it was all over. But somehow, against all the odds, he had survived... it was nothing short of a miracle. Her gaze fixed on the still, but *\*breathing\** body in the crater; her free hand itched to reach out and touch her husband, but she tried to force herself to allow Bernie as much freedom of movement as possible. "How is this possible? He's been up there nine days without oxygen! And... and *\*look\** at him! He could have been burnt to a cinder...."

"He obviously had enough of his powers left to protect him," Bernie replied absently, busily checking Clark's other vital signs. "Okay... that pulse rate is getting steadier now. Give me a minute...." He began to run his hands along Clark's limbs; Lois realised that he was checking for broken bones. He then stopped and studied Clark's position. "Oh, lord, I just hope he hasn't injured his spine. I don't have a cervical collar with me - it's years since I've done any emergency room medicine!"

"If he still had his powers, he wouldn't have broken any bones," Lois pointed out optimistically.

Bernie shook his head. "He can't have had his full powers - look at his Suit! His aura must have been damaged - there's no way that amount of damage could have happened otherwise. And his hair - I don't dare clean his face here in case he has serious burns. I don't have the right equipment, or clean water." He reached into his bag again and this time took out some sterile strips which, Lois could see, were wet on one side, removing them from their wrapping and applying them to Clark's face.

"We can take him home?" Lois asked anxiously.

He nodded. "I don't dare call an ambulance - you know what'll happen as soon as anyone in officialdom realises Superman's back. And anyway...." He shrugged self-consciously.

"And anyway, you're the best person by far to treat him," Lois pointed out. "I don't want anyone else near him who isn't family," she added abruptly. Turning back to Clark then, she crouched by his side, pulling off one glove so that she could take his hand in hers, and softly crooned his name over and over.

Bernie watched her for a minute, then became businesslike. "Lois, I'm



going to try to bring the car as near to here as I can. You'll have to keep an eye on him - make sure that oxygen mask stays in place, and I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

She nodded, not taking her attention off Clark for one moment, and resuming speaking softly to him. "Clark... I should have known, shouldn't I? You were calling to me, you were trying to tell me you were alive, that you were coming home to me, weren't you? Oh, Clark... Clark, never again, I'll never let you do anything like this again...." Her tears were flowing freely over his chest by the time Bernie returned ten minutes later.

Between them, they got Clark onto the back seat of the car. Lois would have climbed in beside him, but Bernie stopped her. "Lois, I need you to drive. I'll have to monitor him on the way back."

She clenched her fists, knowing that he was right but at the same time longing to hold Clark close, not wanting to be separated from him by so much as the distance between the back seat and the driver's seat. "Okay, but you tell me if there's any change, you hear?"

Bernie, in the process of sliding the front passenger seat as far forward as it would go, nodded. He then threw a blanket over Clark's body, explaining that it would be better if no-one saw exactly who their passenger was. They threw the wrecked oxygen tank into the boot, and within a couple of minutes they were ready to go; Lois manoeuvred the car as gently as she could back to the roadway and then onto the freeway. She wanted to put her foot down, but the last thing they needed was to be stopped by a traffic cop, so she forced herself to obey the speed limit all the way back to Metropolis.

She kept glancing in the rearview mirror, just to reassure herself that Clark really was there and that he was still alive. Every few minutes she called back to Bernie, demanding to know Clark's condition; she quickly grew impatient with Bernie's abrupt response of 'stable,' and after a while she launched into a tirade.

"Stable! What the heck does 'stable' mean? This is my husband we're talking about here! I thought he was \*dead\* - you thought he was dead too, and now he turns up and he's barely alive, and we bundle him into a car because we don't dare call an ambulance, and I'm trying, really \*trying\* to concentrate on my driving here and all I can think about is whether my husband is going to die on me before we get back to town when I'm still only getting used to the idea that he's alive after all and... and you've got to give me something better than 'stable'!"

She heard Bernie sigh heavily. "Lois, 'stable' is good! It means his vital signs are stabilising. They've been improving since we found him, and he's doing okay now. His respiration rate is almost normal - well, it's pretty near normal for someone who's unconscious, and his pulse is okay, and his temperature is around normal for him. All I want to do now is get him back to STAR Labs where I can examine him properly and treat his face."

"STAR Labs?" Lois echoed. "Oh no. Not a chance, Bernie! He's coming home. In case you haven't figured it out yet, we are bringing Clark Kent home, not Superman. If we have to strip the remains of that Suit off him before we carry him into the house, then we'll do it, but

this is \*Clark\* we're taking home, and he's going to Hyperion Avenue. You can treat him there - you can go back to STAR Labs for anything else you need, but Clark isn't going anywhere else."

Bernie was silent for a few moments after that, leading Lois to wonder whether there was something he wasn't telling her about her husband's condition. But after a while she caught sight of his expression in the rearview mirror, and he was smiling in admiration.

"Lois, I wouldn't dare argue with you," the scientist told her. "And I suspect Clark wouldn't dare either - and I can see why you're the perfect wife for him," she thought she heard him add almost under his breath. "Yes, I can treat him at your house. We'd better hope he doesn't have any burns to his face, because if you're planning on telling the police that Clark's turned up alive I don't know how the accident he staged could have caused him to suffer burns." Bernie paused, thinking. "I'm sure I can come up with some explanation for any other injuries, or even apply some bandages somewhere to make it look like he has a few cuts and bruises."

"You don't mind doing that?" Lois was surprised; Bernie normally tended to be very concerned about doing what was right, and he suffered crises of conscience on the rare occasion when he broke what he saw as a rule of correct practice.

"Lois, you reminded me of the most important thing here," Bernie replied. "And that is that this is Clark Kent. Not Superman, but Clark. And as such, his family deserves to have him home. If Clark wants anyone to know that Superman's alive he can do something about it himself, when he's ready."

Lois swallowed, moved more than she could say by her friend's loyalty. "Better that Superman isn't found alive for at least a few days," she replied after a few moments. "We don't want anyone connecting Clark's and Superman's miraculous returns from the dead."

"How will you explain Clark's return?" Bernie asked absently; Lois again glanced in the rearview mirror and saw that he was listening to Clark's heartbeat again.

"I'm not sure yet, but I'll think of something," she threw back. "Maybe he's had amnesia or something - I know it's a bit hackneyed, but Henderson did say the witnesses thought Clark was unconscious before he went into the water, which gives us evidence for a head injury, and if we add the shock of the cold water to that...?"

"Yes, amnesia would be a definite possibility," Bernie agreed.

"And Clark's suffered from amnesia before," Lois recalled. "It was after he first tried to stop the Nightfall asteroid - that's why Superman was missing for a couple of days. Clark had amnesia and forgot he was Superman."

"Well, with that history, and with the circumstances of his accident it's my professional judgement that amnesia would be very likely," Bernie agreed. "I guess I could tell your detective friend that's my diagnosis, if it would help."

"That's great, Bernie, thanks!" Lois glanced back and smiled. "We'll work out the finer details, like where he's been and how he got home, later. For now I just want to get him home alive."

< Get him home alive> As she concentrated on steering Bernie's car through the busy city streets, Lois reflected that a bare two or three hours ago the thought that she might be bringing her husband home - even bringing home his dead body - would have seemed like a ridiculous amount of wishful thinking. She needed to pinch herself to convince herself that she was actually awake, that she wasn't dreaming and Clark really was in the back of the car. He was breathing! - he didn't even seem to be too badly hurt despite being unconscious, reading between the lines of Bernie's not-very-informative comments. It all seemed so improbable, so fantastic, when only nine days ago they had said goodbye for good in the living-room of their house. And a short hour afterwards she had watched him fly, as she'd thought, to his death.

Only he wasn't dead. He was alive, and he'd come home to her.

He really *\*had\** been calling to her over the past few days. But how had she not sensed somehow that he was alive? And why had his message this morning seemed so final? - unless he'd thought he really was dying. He'd certainly crashed back into the Earth's atmosphere in a pretty uncontrolled manner, it seemed, if that crater and the state of his clothes, face and hair were anything to go by. But he was alive.

Brushing sudden tears away from her face with one hand, she concentrated on taking them the last few miles towards their home.

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Lois drew Bernie's car to a halt outside the house, and instantly jumped out to throw open the front door, yelling for Martha as she did so. She then ran back to help Bernie lift Clark out of the car, though even with both of them struggling to carry him they were still having difficulties.

"Lois? What are you doing home...? My heavens, what have you got there?" Martha exclaimed, running down the steps in amazement.

"Come and give us a hand," Lois panted. Martha ran to help, then gasped in disbelief as she saw what - or rather, who - Lois and Bernie were carrying.

"Oh my God... Clark!" She clapped her hands to her mouth, visibly shaking.

"Just... get him... inside," Lois panted. "Explain... everything... then."

A few minutes later, they laid him on the couch; ideally, Bernie wanted him in the bedroom, but there was no way the three of them could carry him up there safely. As Bernie commenced another check of Clark's vital signs while explaining to Martha how it was they had found him, Lois grabbed the phone and punched in a number.

"Jimmy - great, I was hoping you'd be there! Look, can you tell Perry I've had to go home and I won't be back today, and can you get over here \*now\*?" At his protests, she added, "Yes, it's urgent! I need you, okay?"

Slamming down the phone, she hurried over to the couch and knelt down beside it, taking Clark's hand in hers and chafing it. "Clark... oh, Clark, sweetheart, please wake up!"

"I guess we need to get that Suit off him as well," Martha said shakily, still visibly shocked by this development. "And... oh, I need to call Jonathan - he'll be so...." She broke off, unable to continue, simply standing at the head of the couch stroking Clark's hair. Lois reached out with her free hand and grasped Martha's, squeezing hard.

The next few minutes seemed to pass in a blur; shortly afterwards, Jimmy arrived leading Lois to believe that he had to have broken all speed limits on his way across. He simply stared, stunned, once Lois brought him in and he saw Clark on the couch; then he glanced at the other occupants of the room. "Okay, what do you need me to do?" he asked weakly.

"Help us get him upstairs," Lois explained; with Jimmy's assistance, a few minutes later they were installing Clark in the main bedroom. Martha and Lois swiftly peeled off the shredded remnants of his Suit, dressing him in a pair of his sleep-shorts instead. As Bernie moved back in place, Martha gazed in amazement at the lead fibres, some of which now lay on the bedroom floor.

"We can thank Bernie for that," Lois whispered, still barely able to believe that this was happening. "Looks like those fibres saved his life."

Bernie was now engaged in checking Clark's pupils again; he glanced towards Lois, murmuring, "Still unresponsive."

"What can we do to help?" Martha demanded.

Bernie shrugged. "He's unconscious, but that could just be his body's way of coping with the trauma he's just been through. His breathing is normal, his pulse-rate's fine and his reactions seem okay. Once I check under these dressings..." he indicated the sterile dressings on Clark's face, "then I think we should leave him to rest."

Lois watched anxiously as Bernie removed the dressings and took a swab of cotton wool, dampened it, and used it to wipe the soot from Clark's forehead. The skin underneath was reddened and puckered; Lois bit her lip to stop herself crying out in agony at the pain her husband must have suffered. Very gently, Bernie cleaned away the blackness from the rest of Clark's face, then began thinking aloud, determining how best to treat the burns since they were all agreed that Clark would not be taken to a hospital.

Suddenly Jimmy exclaimed, "Look! His face!"

Lois, who had been gazing down at Clark's hand in hers, switched her attention to his face. The puckering was disappearing right before their eyes, and his colour was returning to normal.

"Thank God!" Martha whispered.

"What's happening?" Jimmy asked at the same time.

"It's his invulnerability kicking in," Klein explained quickly. "His powers must be returning to full force if his body's healing itself that quickly." He smiled suddenly, the tension which had been present in his expression since picking Lois up outside the Planet instantly vanishing. "He's going to be all right."

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Some time later, Bernie had decreed that Clark be left in peace to recover in his own good time, Jimmy had returned to the Planet with Lois's request that he give Perry the good news, and Martha had called Jonathan and had come back to report that he was speechless with joy. Lois had refused to budge from Clark's side, and had simply spent the intervening time sitting beside the bed, holding Clark's hand between hers and occasionally stroking his brow, resting her head on the pillow beside his. Just how it was that he had managed to return to her was irrelevant right at this moment, she reflected; the only thing that mattered was that he had come back alive.

Martha looked into the bedroom a short while later, reminding Lois that David was still at his nursery and that Beth would be finished school for the day soon. Lois was torn; she needed to go and collect Beth, and she really should bring David home at the same time. But she didn't want to leave Clark's side.... Martha, however, quickly offered to go for the children.

"Bernie's just downstairs, and he said you should call him if there's any change in Clark's condition," her mother-in-law added. "He's been telling me everything - those lead fibres were a truly inspired idea, honey. But he tells me he's still baffled about how Clark survived."

"Me too," Lois murmured, smiling at Martha. "Thanks - don't tell the kids anything yet, okay? I'll have to work out how to explain this to them, after telling them Clark's not coming back!"

Silence descended again as Martha left the house, and Lois stroked Clark's cheek gently as she watched him lying, unmoving, on the bed. "I can't believe you came back to me, my Clark... it's a miracle, nothing short of a miracle. I can't imagine what you went through...." A solitary tear rolled down her cheek and fell onto Clark's face.

He blinked, then his lips curved into a slow smile as Lois watched in wonder, her breath caught in her throat. "You trying to drown me, honey?" he murmured huskily, then he coughed hoarsely.

"Clark! Oh, Clark, you're awake... Clark!" she sobbed, clutching at him and gripping him as if she would never let him go.

He smiled, his gaze never leaving her face as his hand reached out to touch her hair. "Lois..." he rasped, then added, "Thirsty."

"Oh!" She jumped to her feet. "I'll get you some water. I'll only be a second, sweetheart, I promise."

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Clark shifted slightly, easing himself into a reclining position propped up on some pillows. It had been like waking from a dream to find himself in his own bedroom at home, with Lois sitting beside him holding him. In all those lonely hours in space, desperately trying to push himself onwards, towards home, he had never really believed that he would make it. And yet, unless he was dreaming, he was really here.

Could he be dreaming still? he wondered. It was possible, but would the fates be that cruel? He'd thought he was dreaming in space, but after several hours of the same dream he'd begun to accept that maybe it was real. Maybe, just maybe, he had survived the collision with the Kryptonite. He still couldn't understand how it could possibly have happened, how he could possibly have withstood the impact and being in such close proximity with the deadly substance, quite apart from making it all the way back from beyond the edge of the solar system on the amount of oxygen he'd had in his tank. So... it was possible that maybe he hadn't made it back after all, and that \*this\* was a dream, or a hallucination, or whatever.

But if he was dreaming, surely the bedroom would look the same as it had when he'd left - and yet it wasn't. There were things missing... his things. He knew he'd left a book and his watch and wedding-ring on his nightstand, yet they weren't there. Some of his clothes had been hanging on the outside of the wardrobe, and they weren't there either.

And Lois... she'd seemed real enough. Her tear had seemed \*very\* real, and the relief in her voice as she'd spoken to him couldn't possibly be his imagination. So could he really be alive... and back home?

He heard voices outside the room then, and turned expectantly; a moment later, Lois re-entered, followed by Bernie Klein. Clark's eyes widened in surprise. "Bernie...?" he croaked.

"Bernie's been looking after you," Lois explained. "We figure he saved your life."

That might make sense, Clark mused; perhaps Bernie would know just how he'd managed to survive. He'd have to ask the man, but a little later. Right now, he was so thirsty, and pretty weak too. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so weak, although.... He gazed at the wall opposite, and to his surprise he was able to see through to the bathroom, though with a small amount of difficulty.

"Lois says you're thirsty," Bernie said, coming over to the bed and handing Clark a glass filled with what he assumed was water. He took a sip, and almost spat it out again immediately.

"Urrghh! What the heck is that?" he gasped, wrinkling his face.

"You've been in space for nine days without food or water," Bernie replied firmly. "You're bound to be dehydrated - you need more than just water. This is a rehydration fluid, and you really should drink it."

"Bernie, you're forgetting, my body doesn't work like other people's," Clark pointed out with some difficulty, since his throat still felt incredibly dry. Then something else the scientist had said struck him with the force of a hurricane. He gazed hard at Bernie. "Wait a minute - you said \*nine days\*?"

But it was Lois who answered. "Yes, Clark, you've been gone nine days. And... and everyone thought you were dead, there's been memorial services, you should see the flowers, the tributes...." She trailed off, gazing at him helplessly. "I just can't believe you're really alive, and you're back with us!"

"Nine days...." he echoed, horrified. What Lois must have gone through - all his family, in fact. Beth and David would have been told their father wasn't coming back; although he'd gone on his mission \*expecting\* to die, and his family had all expected that he wouldn't return, now that he'd survived he hated to think of the people he loved suffering pain over him.

Wordlessly, he reached out his hand to Lois; she came closer, gripping it in both of hers and holding it against her heart. "I love you," she whispered.

Holding her gaze with his, he mouthed back, "I love you too, Lois, so much." Turning back to Bernie, he croaked, "How on earth could I survive nine days in space on one tank of oxygen?"

"I don't know, Clark. You'll have to tell me more when you feel more up to it," the scientist answered. "In the meantime - I know your body doesn't work the same as anyone else's, but you're still dehydrated. I can hear it in your voice. So either you drink that," he nodded towards the glass which Clark had deposited on the nightstand, "or I'll have to set up a saline drip."

Raising an eyebrow at his would-be tormentor, Clark drawled hoarsely, "And just how do you think you'd be able to get the cannula in, my friend?" He smiled then, conceding that Bernie was probably right, and drained the glass in under a second, pulling a face as he finished. "Satisfied?"

"Just let me check you over now that you're awake, then I'll leave you two together," Bernie replied, approaching the bed again.

"What - you don't want to interrogate me about my adventures over Pluto?" Clark enquired mock-sardonically, softening his words with a grin.

"Pluto?" Bernie did a double-take, staring at Clark in amazement. "If you're serious, then this could be... oh my... do you realise what may have happened to you?"

"No, Bernie, I don't," Clark assured him, finding his voice more easily now. "Do you think I could have some real water now? I don't know if you've ever tasted that 'rehydration' stuff, but I can promise you it's about the worst thing I have ever tasted, and that includes poison gas, trust me on that." He accepted a glass of water from Lois, who had hurried into the bathroom to fetch it for him. "Thanks, honey. And Bernie, I'm looking forward to your explanation of what happened to me, but later, huh?"

He submitted to the scientist's examination, but caught Bernie's hand as the older man was about to leave. "Bernie - I haven't a clue yet what happened or why I'm back. But Lois says you saved my life. Thank you - I'm more grateful than I could ever express." He directed his gaze straight at Bernie, and the scientist blinked after a moment or two, embarrassed.

"Clark - well, I'm just so thankful that it worked, I never expected.... Um... well, I'll get back to STAR Labs now. I'll come back this evening, if that's okay, and you can tell me what happened then?"

Lois offered to see Bernie out, leaving Clark alone again in the bedroom for a few minutes. He lay back on the pillows, still trying to take in what Bernie had revealed. He had really been gone for nine days? It seemed incredible; apart from the fact that he had no idea how he could have survived for so long, he dreaded to think what his family had been going through. But he was back now, and if he could help it, he would never put them through such trauma again.

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Lois climbed the stairs again, wanting to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Clark had returned, he was alive, and he seemed fine! He'd even been talking normally a couple of minutes ago, though he was clearly tired, and thirsty, and probably hungry too.

She entered the bedroom, to find him sitting on the side of the bed deep in thought. "Honey?"

He swung around to face her. "Sorry. Miles away."

She raised an eyebrow at him, and he gave her a wry smile.

"Near Jupiter, as it happens," he quipped back; as she threw him a puzzled look, he smiled. "I'll explain later, when Bernie's here. I'm hoping he can figure out what happened." He held his arms out to her. "Come here, sweetheart. I need to hold you."

She went gladly into his arms, allowing him to pull her onto his lap, luxuriating in the feel of his powerful thighs under her hips, something she never thought she'd experience again. Wrapping her arms around him, she laid her head against his chest. "I don't know how it happened either, Clark, but you have no idea how happy I am to see you."

She felt the rumble of his voice as he answered her. "Honey, I think I have a very good idea. Remember, I left here thinking I'd never see you again either." His arms tightened about her, and he lowered his head to hers. They kissed for a long moment, lips rediscovering each other, tongues tangling, mouths exploring. Finally, he drew back to allow her to take a breath, and he rested his head on top of hers. "Lois, I'm so sorry I was gone so long. I had no idea it had been nine days - I just can't imagine what you've been through."

"It's been tough," she admitted softly. "I'll... I'll show you the Planet's tribute later. You'll like it. Perry did a great job. His obituary was... oh, it was so lovely."



"For Superman?" Clark questioned softly.

Lois shook her head. "Oh, he did a great obit for Superman, but I meant for you, honey - for Clark." She pulled a face, wondering how Perry had reacted to the news; while she knew their boss would be delighted, she couldn't help wondering whether he'd be hurt that he'd had to hear the news second-hand.

But Clark had another concern on his mind. "Honey... the kids, Beth and David - are they okay?"

Lois drew back until she could see his face. "They're... well, it's been tough on them. David's kept crying for you, and Beth's been so quiet - she was angry at first when we told her you wouldn't be coming home any more, but now she... she cries at night, Clark."

He was silent for a long time after her revelation, and she wished she hadn't been so honest with him. But she'd felt she needed to tell him; he was bound to hear from someone how badly their children had reacted to his absence from their lives.

Finally he slid the palm of his hand along her cheek and into her hair, in that gesture which was so familiar and so cherished between them. "Lois, honey, I've finally realised that you've always been right in what you said. There *\*are\** times when Superman needs to leave the world to sort out its own problems."

She gasped in shock at his comment. "What... what do you mean, Clark? That... if this happened again, you wouldn't go?"

He stilled, then sighed heavily. "I'm not sure, honey. What I do know is that I'd take a lot longer to think about it, to see for myself what alternatives there are, take some time to investigate proper protection for myself. I also know I wouldn't be so quick to agree to abandon my wife and children - not for idiots at the Pentagon who couldn't care less whether I come back or not."

"Oh, they've suffered for that," Lois pointed out with a grin, carrying on to explain about the article she'd written using Bernie as a source. Clark raised his eyebrows at first, then grinned as Lois explained about the nature of public reaction to the article, and the denial of any involvement which the White House had been forced to offer along with the Pentagon's embarrassed justification. "Bernie came through for you then, too, sweetheart."

"I owe him a lot," Clark murmured slowly, then added, "What did he do, anyway?"

Lois smiled. "Remember the Suit he modified for you - you said it felt heavier?" Clark nodded. "Well, he found a way to line it with flexible fibres of pure lead."

Clark whistled soundlessly. "No wonder I still had my powers after hitting the meteor! You know, I thought I was hallucinating!"

His head shot up then, as if he'd heard something. "Honey, someone's coming in the front door...?"

"Oh, that'll be Martha with the kids. She'll be so pleased to see you

awake, Clark!"

A broad grin crossed his face. "Mom - \*and\* the kids? Great!" He looked down at himself then. "Umm... I guess I'd better put some clothes on."

Lois clapped a hand over her mouth as she realised the problem with that suggestion. "Umm... honey, we packed your clothes away."

He stared at her, appalled. "You mean... there's nothing here for me to wear?"

"Hey, it could have been worse, you know!" she pointed out. "I kept those shorts - I needed something of yours to hold sometimes."

Clark glanced down at his shorts, clearly visualising what he would have been wearing had Lois not had them handy; then he met her gaze and they both dissolved into laughter.

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Martha was keeping the children busy in the kitchen, Clark realised, and he silently thanked his mother for her tact. Having ascertained from Lois that Jonathan had stored his clothes in the attic, he'd decided to get them down later; for now, he was just anxious to see Beth and David, and his mother - his father as well? Lois hadn't mentioned. Lois's old towelling robe was not exactly what he would prefer to be wearing when he reacquainted himself with his family, but it would do for now.

He was feeling stronger every minute, the weakness he'd felt when he'd first wakened gone completely. Testing his powers, he levitated across the room and then grinned at Lois, who was watching. "No problem!" he assured her with a grin.

"Well, we guessed you couldn't have lost your powers altogether, or you'd have been completely burned up when you fell back to Earth," she pointed out. He nodded; she'd told him about the facial burns which had healed themselves in seconds. She handed him his spare pair of glasses, and they headed downstairs together.

A couple of minutes later, he leaned against the door jamb and watched the scene in the kitchen. Martha was making David wash his hands, which seemed to be covered in some sticky substance; Beth was seated at the table, sipping from a beaker. He simply gazed at the three occupants of the room, marvelling at the fact that he was here, he was seeing them again.

Then he couldn't wait any longer; he deliberately made a sound, and all three turned around. He met his mother's gaze first, seeing the love and delight in her eyes, before dropping his gaze to the two children who were screaming and running towards him. Crouching down, he held out his arms to them and hugged them to him.

"Daddy... oh, Daddy, Mommy said you weren't coming home ever again!" Beth sobbed into his shoulder, while David shrieked 'Daddy!' over and over again.

Clark pulled back a little so that he could look straight at Beth.

"Sweetheart, Mommy thought I wasn't coming back. I didn't think I'd be able to either, but it's all changed now. I'm here, and I won't be going away again."

"But why did Mommy say you'd left us?" Beth sobbed, tears streaking her pretty face.

"Because she thought I had," he replied gently. "Honey, I love you, very much, but something happened last week and I wasn't able to come back to you. But just as soon as I could, I came home."

"Did you go away because you didn't want to be with us any more?" she asked hesitantly, her brown eyes wide.

Clark caught his breath in appalled shock; no wonder Lois had said his daughter had taken the news badly. David, on the other hand, seemed to be taking his father's return in his stride; at first delighted to see his father, the little boy had now wandered off to find his favourite toy dinosaur. His arms tightened around his beautiful daughter, and he found his voice, reaching for the words which would reassure her. "Beth, sweetheart, of course I want to be with you - with all of you. I love your Mommy very much, and you and David are very special to me. I didn't have any choice about going away, but it's all over now. I'm here, and I'm staying. If you want me to stay, that is?" he added, deliberately teasing.

It worked; the little girl giggled. "Of course I want you to stay, Daddy!" She reached for him, hugging him tightly; Clark swung her into his arms and got to his feet, walking through to the living-room and sitting on the couch with her on his lap so that he could cuddle her some more.

He could hear Lois and his mother talking in the background; Lois was telling Martha that he'd had no idea how long he'd been gone. He wondered where his father was, and as Beth scrambled off his lap a few minutes later to go and play, he got up and went back into the kitchen.

"Mom," he said softly, holding out his arms to the woman who stood gazing at him as if she never wanted to let him out of her sight. She ran to him and they embraced for a long moment before he held out his other arm to Lois.

"Where's Dad?" he finally got to ask.

"Oh, honey, he went back to Smallville," Martha explained. "I called him earlier, while you were still unconscious."

Clark nodded; of course his father would need to see to the farm. "I'll fly down after dark and see him," he decided. "For now, we can call him again."

Martha touched the hem of the robe he was wearing. "You might want to find something a bit more decent than that to wear, sweetie! It's really not \*you,\* you know."

He grinned. "Okay, I guess I'll take a quick trip up to the attic. It's not quite as far as where I've just come back from," he teased, heading for the stairs.

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Some hours later, Clark had spoken to his father on the telephone and promised to fly down to Smallville once the children were in bed, and Lois had shown him the Press coverage of both Superman's and Clark's presumed deaths. While he was extremely touched by some of the tributes, he was embarrassed by the extent of the fuss - memorial services, Presidential speeches, the renaming of public places after the Super-hero - and he privately thought some of it was a little over the top. He also found some of the coverage irritating, especially articles which insisted on rehashing the Superman - Lois Lane - Clark Kent 'triangle'.

"You're right about Perry's articles, honey," he murmured to Lois as she brought him a coffee. He pulled her down onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her and nuzzling his face into her hair; he'd barely been able to let her out of his sight for the last couple of hours.

"What are you going to do about Superman, Clark?" she asked quietly, voicing the question which had been on her mind since her husband had woken up and it had been clear that his Super-abilities were still present.

He grimaced; the same thought had occurred to him. "I guess he'll have to stay dead a few days longer, honey. We can't have him miraculously returning at the same time as me."

"So he will come back?" Lois asked hesitantly.

Clark saw the question in her eyes and understood the reasons behind it. "Honey, you know I can't not be Superman. I can't see something happen and not go and help. But I promise you, the ground rules will be a little different from now on. Trust me, Lois, I won't let myself be used again." Not that he would tell Lois, but he had, very briefly, considered the possibility of Superman \*not\* returning; it would prevent him ever being asked to sacrifice his life and everything he held dear again, and it would guarantee Lois and his children his undivided attention, something they deserved and had every right to expect. He had also not been able to stop himself feeling that, in a way, it would serve the powers-that-be right for their attitude towards the Super-hero, the Pentagon's view that he was expendable. But he had not entertained such thoughts for longer than a fleeting second. Of \*course\* Superman would return; the Super-hero was part of who he was. Clark could no more refuse to use his abilities to help where needed than he could stop loving Lois.

Another thought occurred to him then, and he smoothed her hair back from her face before speaking. "Honey, you told me Bill Henderson came here to tell you about my accident - we haven't called him yet to tell him I'm alive, have we?" He'd been touched by Lois's description of the detective's reaction, and since he also considered Henderson a friend as well as a professional colleague he didn't want to leave the man in ignorance of his return. In any case, he knew that the police would need to close their files on his supposed death.

Lois shook her head. "I never thought about that!" she exclaimed, shocked. "And I haven't even told my parents and Lucy yet either!"

"Well, I guess we have a few phone calls to make," he said softly.

They called Henderson first, and Clark could have sworn that the hard-bitten detective's voice turned husky when he realised that he really was speaking to Clark Kent. Clark gave the detective the story they'd rehearsed, that he'd managed to pull himself from the river a couple of miles downstream but that he hadn't been able to remember who he was or anything about himself; his wallet must have fallen out of his suit pocket while he'd been in the river, he suggested. In the intervening period, he'd made his way back into the city and for a while had hung out around the South Side, Clark told the detective. They'd chosen that location since hardly anyone there would be able to remember whether or not they'd seen Clark during that time - most inhabitants of that area of the city were drunk or stoned out of their minds most of the time, and tended to adopt an attitude of 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.' Clark explained that his memory had finally returned that day and he'd immediately headed straight home, to give his family the greatest shock of their lives.

"A bit corny, but since he doesn't have anything else to go on, it'll have to do," Lois observed as they ended the call. It was her family's turn next, and Clark was genuinely gratified by the response of his parents-in-law. Lucy was so excited she could barely speak, and he had to promise that he would call her again when she was able to be more coherent.

Later, after Clark had insisted that he should be the one to put the children to bed and read to them, he dressed in his darkest clothes for the flight to Smallville. Martha appeared downstairs as he was ready to go, her travel-bag in her hand.

"Honey, will you take me with you?" she asked with a lop-sided smile.

"Sure, no problem!" Clark agreed. "You mean, you're going back to stay?"

Martha nodded. "You two don't need me here now, and Jonathan \*does\* need me. And I want to go home."

Lois nodded. "Martha, I don't know how I'd have managed without you and Jonathan." She threw her arms around the older woman, hugging her tightly. "I love you both - you're very special people."

A tearful reunion with his father later, Clark flew silently back in through the bedroom window, taking a quick look at the children as he padded out onto the landing. They were sleeping soundly; he paused for a moment and just gazed at them. Two little miracles, as he called them, given that they were the product of a Krypto-human liaison. He was indeed fortunate, he mused as he strolled downstairs.

Lois wasn't alone; on the other couch sat Bernard Klein who seemed pleased to see Clark up and about. Clark grinned at the older man. "You mean I'm finally going to find out what happened to me up there?" he teased.

"If you tell me what you know, I'll see if I can make any sense out of it," Bernie agreed.

Quietly, reflectively, Clark began to tell the scientist everything he could remember, from crashing through the meteor and everything starting to whiz past him at a rapid pace, to feeling that he was blacking out, and then waking up to find himself some way past Pluto. Bernie listened in silence, nodding occasionally, as Clark embarked on the tale of his journey back to Earth.

"The weird thing is, Bernie, that it only seemed like a few hours to me. I mean, I don't know how long I was unconscious, but the flight back from beyond the edge of the solar system only seemed like five hours or so. And my air supply didn't run out until I was really close to re-entering the Earth's atmosphere. I could even see the US, and I was trying to make for Metropolis when I ran out of air. That's when I really thought I was dying."

"I heard you," Lois murmured softly. He shot her a look; she shook her head, indicating by the gesture that she would explain later.

Bernie, however, was focused on something else. "Clark, I guess you were flying fast, were you? Did you happen to notice anything strange - I mean, about the planets, the sun, maybe?"

Clark frowned. "Funny you should say that, Bernie. When I looked down at the planets - well, those I could see - they looked kind of squashed. And everything was a weird colour, too."

A slow smile spread over the scientist's face. "Einstein was right!"

"Huh?"

"I know what happened to you!" Klein looked thoughtful for a moment. "If you were moving *\*really\** fast, close to the speed of light, then what you saw is just what Einstein predicted. The 'squashed' universe would result from the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction, the colour changes from the Doppler effect, and your air supply could last for over a week because of time dilation - it was nine days *\*here,\** but for *\*you,\** because you were moving so fast for most of the time, it only seemed like a few hours...."

"Ummm... in English, please, Bernie," Lois prompted, pre-empting Clark who was just about to ask the same question.

But the scientist still seemed half-lost in whatever he was thinking about. Then he looked up at Clark, his eyes alight with enthusiasm. "This is great! People have been trying to test relativity for years - ever since Einstein published his work, in fact - but until now, we've been limited to measuring tiny, tiny effects with things like atomic clocks. Now, we've got some hard evidence of what happens at near-light speeds... it's just a shame that it's all qualitative. I wish I'd thought to give you some instruments...."

"What?!" Clark protested. "Bernie...!"

"Oh... um... oh, I'm sorry, Clark, it's just that you don't know how

exciting this is! To have proof that Einstein's time dilation theory was really correct! Oh, I know we've proved that people who fly on Concorde gain a couple of seconds, but you've actually managed to jump into the middle of next week! I just can't wait to write this up... what a discovery, a really incredible discovery!"

Clark exchanged glances with Lois, wondering whether Bernie had actually forgotten, in his excitement, that the real miracle was that Clark had returned alive. But he shook his head then in amused resignation. The man had saved his life, after all. He could forgive Bernie his eternal fascination with science just this once.

But Lois had thought of something else. "But why did the tracer stop working?"

"Huh?" Bernie's mind had clearly been elsewhere, and he seemed abstracted for a few moments. Then his expression cleared and he became animated again. "It's because Clark was travelling at near light-speed. The receiver couldn't pick up the signal, and then when Clark slowed down to reverse his direction he was far too far away. He was out of range. So it was only when Clark slowed down again to prepare for his re-entry to the Earth's atmosphere that the receiver was able to pick up the signal again."

Clark shook his head in wonder. It seemed he really had travelled through time; a period which for him had only been a matter of hours had actually been over a week for everyone else. And his air supply had lasted because it had been sufficient for the amount of time \*he\* had experienced, rather than the time which had elapsed on Earth.

But whatever the explanation, he was home, safe, back with the people he loved. And that was all down to Bernie Klein - and, he thought, Lois. She had given him his reason to return; she had been the one person on his mind the whole time. It must have been his thoughts of Lois, his need to be with her, which had spurred him on to speeds of which he had never even dreamed himself capable. He had thought of her time and time again on his long, fraught journey, calling her name to himself over and over. And, from something she'd said, he wondered whether she'd heard him. But was that possible? He didn't know. But after what he'd just experienced in the past few hours - or the past week, whatever it was - he would almost believe that anything was possible.

Lois's voice interrupted his thoughts then, addressing the scientist. "Bernie - did you know Clark might be alive when we went to find him?" she asked, an edge to her voice. Clark grinned inwardly, glad that the question was not being addressed to him: he didn't envy Bernie if the scientist had indeed suspected he could be alive, and hadn't told Lois.

But Bernie shook his head. "I don't understand why, but the possibility of time dilation had never occurred to me until just now, Lois."

"But you brought your medical bag with you from the car," she pointed out forcefully.

Surprised, he ran his hand over his bald head. "Like I said, I was being prepared for all eventualities.... Lois, you'd told me in the

car about thinking you'd heard Clark's voice. I really didn't think there was any chance at all - but one thing I learned long ago where you two are concerned is that anything is possible."

That makes two of us, Clark mused as he gazed at his wife, the woman who, a few short hours ago by his time, he'd expected never to see again. He reached for her hand almost without realising it, holding it tightly within his as if he never intended to let it go.

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"Perry!"

"Hi, honey. Mind if we come in?" The gruff voice of the Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet could be heard from the doorstep as Clark was making coffee in the kitchen. He smiled; he was glad of an opportunity to see Perry before turning up for work the following day.

He walked through to the living-room in time to see Perry and Jimmy enter with Lois. The Chief stared at him, almost as if he'd needed the evidence of his own eyes to believe that Clark was actually alive. Clark swiftly crossed the room and took Perry's hand warmly in his own.

"It's good to see you, Chief," he told his boss.

"Aw, son, you don't know how good it is to see you! When Jimmy here came back to the office this afternoon and told me you were alive after all, I thought he was kidding me. Pretty poor joke too, I thought. But, Judas Priest! It sure is wonderful news, Clark!"

Clark switched his attention to Jimmy. "Lois and Mom tell me you've been pretty great while I was gone," he said softly. "They said you spent a lot of time with Beth and David - and that's worth a heck of a lot to me, Jim."

Jimmy shrugged. "I was glad to do it, CK. I told Lois, I love them - and I wanted to help. It was something practical I could do."

"So what happened?" Perry demanded. "How come you made it back alive?"

Clark grinned. "If you'd come half an hour earlier, you could have had the technical explanation from Bernie Klein. But as it is, you'll have to make do with me. You know about the lead fibres in the Suit?"

Perry nodded. "Jimmy told me."

"Well, they kept me alive, but as for how I was gone so long, basically the explanation is that I got knocked into the middle of next week," Clark informed them with a grin. "Okay, it gets a lot more technical than that, but that's about as much as I can handle for now."

Lois nudged him teasingly with her elbow and took over the explanation. Clark was so focused on listening to the sound of her



voice that he only heard about one word in four; "time dilation... experienced... eight hours to him... weird... Einstein...." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, holding her close against him and wondered whether she really did understand Bernie's science or whether this was her eclectic reporter's brain simply repeating the information she had absorbed without truly understanding it. He didn't actually care; all that mattered to him was that this woman was his wife and that she was beautiful and brilliant and totally, completely perfect for him.

He realised that Perry was addressing him again, and turned his attention to his boss.

"So how did Clark Kent survive?" Perry was asking. "I mean, you must have a story for public consumption. I'll need to put something in the Planet - I can just make deadline if I get on back over there now."

"Yes, we have a story," Clark replied, and related the tale they'd told Henderson. Perry's sardonic lift of his eyebrows told Clark how thin the story actually sounded, and he smiled ruefully. "Sorry, it was the best we could come up with. But honestly, what do you think is the worst anyone would think? That I have a mistress somewhere and I faked my own apparent death to spend a week with her? Because I don't think anyone who knew Lois would believe that for a second."

"Because anyone who knew me would know I'd strangle any other woman who had her claws into you, or that having me, you don't need any other woman, honey?" Lois enquired in dulcet tones, throwing him a 'you better get the right answer here, buster' stare.

He pretended intimidation for a second, then grinned. "Honey, I can barely keep up with you! How could I cope with another woman as well?"

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"I can still hardly believe you're back," Lois told Clark later, in bed, as she drew circles around his chest with her index finger. "I'm almost afraid to go to sleep in case I wake up and discover I've dreamt it."

"Oh, I'm back, trust me," he murmured huskily, trailing his lips over her shoulders as he held her warm body close to him. "Want me to prove it to you conclusively?"

She grinned at him. "And just how do you propose to do that?" she enquired impishly.

"Oh, I think I could come up with a suggestion or two...." He trailed off, his eyes darkening with passion as his caresses caused the strap of her nightgown to slip down her shoulders. Seconds later, his lips were following the path his gaze had traced, and Lois was emitting tiny cries as her hands clutched at his shoulders.

"Oh, you mean \*that\*...?" she gasped, a grin spreading across her face as she allowed her fingers to caress the taut muscles in his back and shoulders. For a long time the only sounds which could be heard in the bedroom were low moans and sighs, as Lois encouraged

Clark to make up for nine long days without the comfort of his presence, and eight nights sleeping alone in their bed, during every one of which she'd woken during the night with an ache in her heart and tears in her eyes.

Later, Clark tugged Lois gently over to lie on his chest, threading his fingers through her hair. "What did you mean, you \*heard\* me, honey?"

"You were calling to me, weren't you?" she said softly. "When you were flying back.... I kept thinking I could hear you call my name, but I was so stupid - I didn't allow myself even to think for a second that you might be alive. I was so sure you had to be dead...."

He wrapped his arms more tightly around her, hating the note of pain he could hear in her voice. "Lois, honey, of course you thought I was dead. How could you have known...?"

"You know how," she told him quietly. "It's that... 'connection' we have. I \*did\* hear you call to me. This morning, I sensed you telling me that you were sorry, that you tried, but you knew you were dying... and I just didn't know what it meant, or where it was coming from!"

Clark simply stroked her hair for a few moments. "Honey, I had no idea you could hear me, or sense me, or whatever it was happened. But I'm glad you did... all I was thinking about, the whole time I was flying back, was you and how much I wanted to come back to you. Even though I never thought I could make it, I wanted - needed - to try. I'm sure that's how it was I was able to fly so fast."

"But the weirdest thing was...." Lois began, then started again. "I watched you in Bernie's office, and when the dot - you - disappeared, I actually \*felt\* the connection disappear. That's why I was so sure you were dead, because I'd felt you leave me."

He hadn't realised she'd gone to Bernie's office. But then, he should have known Lois would do that; in her place, he would have done the same. So she had actually seen him - or at least, the dot on Bernie's monitor which represented him - smash into the meteor?

"Bernie said the dot disappeared because I'd speeded up so much that..."

"That you were literally beating time," Lois finished slowly. "So the reason I stopped sensing you was that you literally weren't there any more. You'd jumped into the next day or whatever, you weren't in the same time as me. And that's why.... Oh, Clark, I wish I'd realised, then I would have \*known\* that you had to be still alive when I heard you calling me!"

He rested his head on top of hers. "I'm not sure whether that would really have helped, honey. That last time... I really did think I was dying. I'd finally run out of air."

She held him tightly, her embrace telling him far more than words could how grateful she was that he had survived. "You must have been close enough to be able to hold your breath, I guess."

"I guess so. I blacked out, so I haven't a clue what happened after that."

"But you made it back. That's the important thing," Lois pointed out firmly.

"Yes - but we have to decide when Superman's going to reappear," Clark said thoughtfully. "I know we need to wait at least a few days, but it's not going to be easy. Just after Bernie left, I heard a news item about a collapsed bridge in Boston, and it was really difficult to stop myself from rushing to help."

"Was anyone hurt?" she asked anxiously, drawing back to study his face.

He shook his head, a rueful smile slowly appearing. "No - actually, the emergency services were able to handle that one. And it's probably done them good over the last while to know they couldn't rely on Super help turning up. But I am going to be Superman again, Lois. I have to be."

"I know you do," she told him softly. "But you have to be careful for a while, at least. And how do you plan on letting everyone know you're back?"

That made him grin. "You mean you're not after the exclusive which is going to win you that Pulitzer? That's if the article you wrote on my disappearance doesn't win it for you first," he teased.

"Oh, of course Lane and Kent will have the first 'Superman Returns' interview," Lois informed him confidently. "But you can reappear before that - just don't give anyone else all the details."

"I guess I can manage that," he murmured. "Okay, let's give it two or three days - I don't think I could take much longer than that of hearing calls and not being able to go and help."

"And that'll give Beth and David time to get used to you being around again," Lois pointed out softly. Clark stilled at that; he had noticed that Beth had been very clingy when he'd said goodnight to them, even to the point of asking whether he'd still be there in the morning. He'd known his disappearance would hurt them, but seeing the evidence of it was a different matter entirely. Yes, he could put Superman to one side for a few days if it meant his daughter would be reassured that her father was back to stay.

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It had been a hectic, but wonderful few days, Lois reflected as she prepared to attend a press conference at STAR Labs. After spending time playing with the children on the morning after his return, Clark had accompanied her to the Planet; the story of his reappearance had already appeared in that morning's paper, so they'd known their colleagues would be aware that he was alive. Still, they'd been completely unprepared for the rapturous welcome which had greeted them once they'd stepped off the elevator. Someone had done a very effective - and speedy - job of decorating the newsroom with bunting and a large banner which read 'Welcome back, Clark!' The Superman tributes had been taken down, though they were still in the conference room; later that day, Lois had seen Clark sneak in for a

quick look, and since he'd emerged afterwards with a familiar-looking expression on his face, she guessed he'd been reading some of the letters and was obsessing.

She'd had her guess confirmed at home later, when he'd told her some of what he'd read, but she comforted him by reminding him that very soon the world would know that Superman hadn't perished.

"Hey, I wonder if this means the President will want you to go to Washington to receive your Medal of Honor in person?" she'd teased him.

He'd almost recoiled. "I hope not! Okay, I know it's a tremendous honour, Lois, but... it's just not me, is it?"

"No, but it is Superman," she'd pointed out gently. "And after what \*Superman\* did for the world - even if no-one knows what \*Clark Kent\* did, or almost did - you deserve it."

A thought had occurred to her then, and she laughed aloud. "Clark, I just remembered something from all that constitutional stuff I learned at school. Did you know that all military personnel are required to salute holders of the Medal of Honor, no matter what their rank? And Superman doesn't wear military uniform, so he doesn't have to salute back...." She dissolved into giggles.

"You mean that if Superman happens to run into the Joint Chiefs of Staff again, or any of the other Pentagon top brass, they'll have to salute me?" Clark enquired, his eyes alight at the irony. The very people who'd had so little respect for him that they'd been prepared to treat him as expendable.... It was a shame that Superman wasn't supposed to enjoy the spectacle of other people's discomfort, he'd told Lois then.

She'd grinned. "Oh, but Clark can. And so can I. You'd better go to Washington to collect that medal, Flyboy - and make sure you get invited to the next July Fourth or Inauguration celebration too."

"Just to rub it in?" he'd enquired, laughing.

"Well, why not?" she'd agreed.

Things had been busy in other respects, even without the distraction of Superman in their lives. They'd had meetings with the police to resolve the case of Clark's disappearance, and then the car insurance company had wanted statements before they would agree a final settlement for the repairs to the Jeep. Apart from that, Clark had settled swiftly back into the routine of work, getting involved in the Wilson insider share dealing story with Lois. His Super assistance had in fact helped them gain a confession from the Senator; Clark had done a bit of Super-speed hacking into Wilson's email server and had found some incriminating notes. "Someone should tell him that once an email has been stored overnight on the server it remains accessible even after it's been deleted," Clark had commented to Lois and Jimmy afterwards.

Confronted with the evidence, even though he challenged Lois and Clark about how they had obtained copies of his correspondence, the senator had confessed and the first Lane and Kent front page story

since Clark's return had been the resignation of Senator Wilson. Perry was very pleased.

And this morning they had been assigned to cover a press conference. As Lois pulled on her jacket, she caught sight of Clark heading over to her. Her lips curved into a smile as he approached and slid his arm around her shoulders. "Ready to go, honey?"

She nodded. "Jimmy's coming with us."

"Great! He bringing his camera?"

"Yeah - he asked Perry if he could be the photographer for this assignment."

They strolled together towards the elevator, Jimmy joining them on the way; a couple of minutes later they were in the newly repaired Jeep driving out of the Planet's underground car park. Jimmy leaned forward in his rear seat, smiling enthusiastically.

"How've you been the last few days, CK?"

Clark flashed a quick smile back at his friend. "Pretty good - happy to be alive."

"He's been getting itchy feet," Lois observed drily, but at a look from her husband, she amended her statement. "Well, I'd say itchy \*wings\* except that Superman doesn't have wings. He's just longing to get out and start flying around again."

"It's not quite like that," Clark pointed out dryly, explaining for Jimmy's benefit, "It's been pretty tough hearing people in trouble, and seeing emergencies on TV, and not being able to go and help. But we agreed, Superman has to stay dead a little bit longer."

"You're right about that," Jimmy agreed soberly. "It's enough of a surprise that Clark Kent comes back alive, but if Superman reappeared at the same time... well, anyway, I guess if you hadn't already told me, I'd be suspicious." He paused, then added quickly, as if the thought had just occurred to him, "Hey, Lois, CK, is it going to be a problem for you that more of us know your secret now?"

Lois answered before Clark could. "Jimmy, we chose to tell you and Perry and Bernie. All of you are old and trusted friends, and I guess even without this we'd have told you some time anyway. We \*do\* trust you to keep the secret, and let me tell you that it's great to be able to talk openly about what Clark can do, and what the kids might be able to do, with a friend!"

"Lois is right, Jimmy," Clark added. "I've already had this conversation with Perry, would you believe? I mean, he's known for years, but he always kept it to himself because he thought I'd prefer it if he pretended not to know. But trust me on this, I think having you and him knowing will make things a lot easier at work. And as for Bernie - well, the man saved my life. And I feel a lot happier knowing he'll be taking care of our kids as well, especially now that Beth does seem to be developing special abilities. She's definitely hearing things she shouldn't from time to time."

"That'll be a tough one, CK, telling her that the reason she can see

through walls is that her dad's Superman!"

"Don't joke, Jimmy - we're just hoping to put it off as long as possible!" Lois replied with a grimace. "But that's where I'm glad you and Perry are in on the secret. It'll give them someone other than family to talk about their Super abilities with."

Clark manoeuvred the Jeep into the STAR Labs car park, and then the three joined the reporters assembling in front of the imposing building. No-one seemed to know exactly what to expect of this conference: the press statement had simply said that Dr Bernard Klein had a very important announcement to make regarding the journey made by Superman which had destroyed the meteor. Lois nudged Clark, murmuring under her breath, "You think Bernie's going to enjoy this?"

Clark grinned. "He deserves to!"

Jimmy aimed his camera at the two of them, standing with Clark's arm around Lois's waist and her hand on his shoulder. With a grin at Clark, their friend muttered under his breath, knowing Clark could hear him, "Just in case you need proof you were here, CK!"

Their attention was caught then by the diffident figure of Dr Klein stepping in front of the microphones, calling for silence. The massed throng of reporters and photographers all stared at the scientist, wondering what he had to tell them and whether they would be able to understand it; several of the news reporters wondered aloud for the third or fourth time why their editors hadn't chosen to send their science correspondents.

"Um... thank you all very much for coming," Klein began, then jumped back from the microphones as a harsh squeal of feedback was emitted. He hesitated, then tried again. "I know you're all wondering why I've asked you here today..."

"Excuse me," Clark murmured softly as he slipped from Lois's side, his hand on his tie.

Bernie swallowed, glanced towards the crowd, then continued. "I have some news which I thought you might be interested in... um... well, it's quite an astounding development, in fact...." He trailed off again, looking a little uncertain in the face of the dozens of openly sceptical reporters.

A sound of rushing wind was audible from above, and then a sight very few people in the crowd could ever have imagined seeing again came into view. A figure in a blue suit, red boots and cape drifted downwards until he was standing beside the scientist. Superman smiled at Dr Klein before turning to the microphones. "I think I can take it from here, Bernie."

"Superman!"

Several people began to shout at once.

"But how is this possible?"

"Is this a different Superman?"

Bernie tapped on one of the microphones to call for silence. "I think I can assure you all that there is only \*one\* Superman - and this is he."

"I assure you all that I am very much alive," Superman said, smiling, "And I owe my life to my good friend and physician, Bernard Klein." He paused, allowing his audience to take in that fact, before elaborating. "Before I left to stop the meteor, Dr Klein worked around the clock to devise a method of providing me with a measure of protection from the concentrated Kryptonite in the meteor. He succeeded, and I will be forever grateful to him for his efforts - and the fact that he cared enough to do so."

Lois smiled at Clark's comment; she would make sure that particular sentiment got into the Planet. It was a subtle but effective dig at the Pentagon pen-pushers who \*hadn't\* cared enough to consider Superman's survival a necessary goal.

But Superman was still speaking. "Naturally neither Dr Klein nor I have any intention of revealing the nature of his procedure. But I do issue this warning to anyone who might consider at any time in the future attempting to get the better of me with Kryptonite, should they manage to acquire any: Dr Klein's method is extremely effective. Without it I would not be here today. And I will naturally be continuing to use it."

That was certainly true, Lois reflected with a smile. The day after Clark's return they had driven over to STAR Labs with Clark's entire collection of Super-Suits and left them with the scientist so that he could have them all lined with the lead fibres.

"But why has it taken you so long to come back?" a reporter for LNN demanded.

Superman smiled apologetically. "I'll have to ask Dr Klein to explain that, but I assure you that I didn't deliberately delay. As far as I was aware, I was away a matter of hours - half a day at most." He fell silent, indicating that Bernie should take over. The scientist did so, giving the assembled reporters the same explanation about Einsteinian time dilation as he had told Lois and Clark a few days earlier.

"So in fact, as far as Superman is concerned, he returned on the same day he left Earth; what was about eight hours for him turned out to be twelve days in Earth time," Bernie concluded. Lois smiled; to her secret amusement Bernie had been very happy to collude in the minor deception that Superman had only just returned to Earth. He was as anxious as the rest of them to protect Clark's secret.

Superman took questions for a while, most of which were about the meteor and the difficulty involved in smashing it, and the fate of the remnants. He was able to assure his listeners that any remaining fragments seemed to be heading away from Earth, though he added that the explosion had apparently destroyed much of its substance. This was something Bernie had discovered from EPRAD a couple of days earlier, and Clark had been very surprised until he'd remembered what had happened to the piece of Kryptonite Jason Trask had used on him in Smallville. That had exploded, and had actually disappeared, so Bernie hypothesised that Kryptonite must be an extremely unstable substance.

After a while, a reporter with the Star posed a different question. "Superman, have you had time to read any of the coverage of your presumed death?"

Superman paused, then nodded. "Yes, I scanned some of the newspapers in order to catch up with what's been happening over the past few days. And I would like to thank all of you for your kind words and your tributes; and can I also use the medium of this press conference to thank everyone who contributed to the Superman memorial fund? I will be speaking to the organisers of that fund within the next few days to discuss a more appropriate use for the contributions."

The reporter who'd asked the question nodded agreement. "Superman, I was specifically wondering whether you'd seen Lois Lane's article about the attitude of the Pentagon."

"Yes, I saw it. And, by the way, I am also very glad to see that Ms Lane's husband is alive and well. I'm only sorry that I couldn't be there to help him when he had his accident."

Lois smiled at her husband's words, though privately she thought he'd taken a risk referring to himself like that. Someone was bound to notice that Clark Kent was no longer standing beside his wife. But then she heard Jimmy informing someone standing nearby that Clark had gone into the labs to interview one of Klein's assistants. < Nice one, Jimmy!> she thought, approvingly.

But Superman was speaking again. "Yes, I saw that article, though I also knew of the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff before I left. I'm sure they felt they had good reason for their views, though I was not privy to their decision-making." He smiled then, and continued, "I would like at this point to thank publicly our President, and Secretary-General Tamba, for their very kind tributes. I hope to be able to thank them personally soon."

< Oh, very nice, Clark> Lois thought. < Damned with faint praise... the military will hate you!> Her husband brought the press conference to an end very soon after that, shaking hands with Bernie Klein and taking off once again. He flew in a wide swoop over the STAR Labs building, affording everyone present a sight of the Super-hero in action, before disappearing from sight.

Desperate to get back and file their stories, the reporters all hurried from the site of the conference; as Lois and Jimmy reached the Jeep, they saw Clark standing beside it, an amused grin on his face.

"Well done, honey!" Lois told him softly as they got into the car.

"CK, you were great!" Jimmy exclaimed. "I loved your comment about the Chiefs of Staff!"

Clark steered the Jeep back out onto the road. "I guess we'd better head back to the Planet - I know we're already written our story, but we can't have anyone else knowing that, can we?"

"Why, what were you going to suggest?" Lois demanded.



"Oh, like you said earlier, I have been missing my 'other half,' Clark mused aloud. "I kind of feel like going flying."

Lois exchanged glances with Jimmy. "See what I have to put up with?"

"Well, I guess now Superman's back he'll have to do a patrol around the city," Jimmy defended Clark.

Lois rolled her eyes. "Are you going to be taking his side?"

"Admit it, honey, you know you're longing for me to take you flying again," Clark teased her. Lois grinned; he was right there. She always loved flying with him, and always would.

"Tonight. After the kids are asleep. And Jimmy, for agreeing with Clark you get to babysit!"

"It's a date," Clark murmured.

They would certainly wait until after Beth and David were asleep. Even now, three days later, both children were still clingy, and Beth had a tendency to wake up in the middle of the night having dreamed that her father had left again. It seemed that it would take the two of them, and especially Beth, some time to get over the pain and confusion of their father's nine-day absence. It would take some time, and hard work by both of them, to rebuild the child's trust and confidence after what had happened. Although Lois knew that, despite what Clark had said to her on the day of his return, in similar circumstances she would accept that he had to do exactly the same thing, she bitterly regretted the effect the whole thing had had on their children.

But Beth and David would grow out of their insecurities, she reasoned. And she would forget, some time, those long, lonely days and nights when she'd thought Clark was dead. For now, what mattered was that he had come back to her, and even better, he now had protection against the only real threat to him, Kryptonite. Bernie's invention wasn't perfect since, as he'd pointed out, it left Clark's neck and head exposed, but as Clark's collision with the meteor had proved, that protection seemed to be enough to prevent his powers disappearing.

He'd had no choice but to go: given that his choice had been between saving the planet or saving his own life, his action had been for the greater good of humankind. And for once the good are rewarded, Lois reflected; Clark's life had been spared, and his family again had its dearly loved husband and father. The world had been given back its Superman.

< Make sure you take better care of Superman in future> Lois mused, considering that thought as an angle for an article in the Planet. The world had come very close to losing the hero it had seemed to take for granted; perhaps it should learn to value Superman more. Clark had already indicated that he intended to set out some ground rules for what Superman would and would not do in future, as much to enable him to spend more time with Lois and the children as to ensure that he would not be taken for granted any more.

It still wouldn't stop Superman performing the small acts of kindness

which no-one ever heard about: rescuing a puppy for a crying child, helping a bewildered pensioner to find her way home, visiting a sick child in hospital and so on. Clark wouldn't be Clark if he didn't do those kind of things.

Yes, they all had a second chance to get the balance right, Lois reflected. And one thing she would never neglect was telling, and showing, her husband how much she loved him. She figured that he wouldn't object to that; smiling inwardly, she remembered just how they'd spent the whole of the night before showing each other yet again how much they loved each other. Clark was certainly making up for lost time; he seemed to feel that it was his responsibility to compensate for each and every one of those eight nights she'd spent alone. Not that she was complaining... far from it!

"What are you thinking, honey?" Clark's voice intruded into her thoughts.

She studied him, then her mouth curved into a teasing smile. "Oh, I was just reflecting on how \*good\* you are, Clark," she informed him.

He caught the expression in her eyes, and choked back a laugh. "I'm relieved you think so, honey!"

"CK?" Jimmy's voice sounded puzzled. "Well, I mean we all know Superman's a great guy, and a real hero - you don't need to be told that, surely?"

He couldn't understand why his two companions burst out laughing.

- The End -

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file.